

Foundation or Fragment of Local Democracy?
Analyzing the Role and Position of Local Councillors in Belgium

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On Wednesday 2 January 2013, many Belgian councils assembled for the first time in the new legislature. This meeting was mainly used to inaugurate the newly elected councillors, mayors and aldermen. At the same time, the fresh start for the councillors marked the symbolic closure of my research. The moment reminded me of two conversations that I had with some friends the months before. First a friend asked me what my research was now really about. When I answered him that I was studying the Belgian local councillors, he responded: *“I see, you are studying the mayor and his aldermen.”* My clarification that this also includes the *other* councillors was followed by the reply: *“well they are politicians, this means that they must be in it for the money of course.”* The second conversation took place in the context of the recent local elections and the turmoil about the coalition formation in the municipality another friend lived in. After discussing the topic for a while, he said: *“and after all, you have to realize that it remains just local politics. It’s not as if it will make a real difference anyhow.”* In this way, and probably unwittingly, both conversations summarized common clichés about local councillors. They are often neglected or misunderstood, mistrusted and belittled.

This study is the result of my attempt to gain a realistic, scientific and solid understanding of the Belgian local councillors as protagonists of our democratic system. Before commencing with the report of my research, however, I am pleased to dedicate the opening pages to some people who have been a great help and support for me throughout the years of my research.

First and foremost, I would like to express my special thanks to my supervisor and co-supervisors. *Herwig*, for hiring a true Standard-fan, but also for giving me all your confidence, support and every possibility to develop my research in the most optimal way. *Kristof*, for your numerous priceless tips and advice, for the critical revisions that greatly helped to improve my work. *Filip*, for your theoretical input and emphasis on the interpretation of my research in a broader, real-life perspective. The personal triangulation of this team has been a true asset and inspiring lead for me.

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Roeselare, January 2013.

“The starting point is that local councillors are no big heroes, no superior people, no king-philosophers; but they are no inferior people either, no small-minded power-mad persons, no Machiavelli’s in stamp format. They tend to be normal people, who have the courage, ambition and will to be a representative of the people.”

(Tops & Zouridis, 2002: 15;
translated quote from Dutch)

CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1. BEYOND THE BALLOT, AWAY FROM THE LIMELIGHT: ANALYZING THE ROLE AND POSITION OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS IN BELGIUM¹

Deadline 14/10. It was not a coincidence that the producers of a popular Flemish television series chose this title for their *whodunit* about the disappearance of a little girl. The TV-series, taking place against the backdrop of the (fictitious) local elections in Belgium's largest municipality Antwerp, was broadcast in the weeks before the official local elections on Sunday 14 October 2012. Somehow this illustrates the build-up to those elections. In the months before *14/10*, media had continued their tradition of extensively covering the battle for the voter. Debate shows, information programs, analyses per municipality, interactive devices (e.g. launch and monitor policy proposals, test party programs, etc.): they all emerged as signs of what the sociologist Huyse (2012) has called a *chronic election fever*.

Also outside this media frame, *14/10* reminded citizens of the political process in their municipality again. The street scenes were decorated with numerous posters being placed in gardens, on billboards and cars. Spread over 3 regions, 589 municipalities and 2.791 lists, the nearly 60.000 candidates who ran for the council flooded citizens with personal leaflets and house visits. They rallied their friends and family members, attended local debates, sports games, festivities and the weekly markets. Additionally, the growing popularity of the new social media was used as an innovative campaign strategy to launch twitter and facebook messages, personalized magazines, websites and even youtube spots.

Judging by the turmoil associated with this election, one would suspect that being a local councillor in Belgium should be an important responsibility. And indeed formally this claim holds true. Councillors are supposed to be the key actors in local government

¹ We use the term *local councillor* and *local council*, *local council meeting*, etc. as synonyms for *municipal councillor*, *municipal council*, *municipal council meeting*, etc. throughout the text.

(Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). The council, on its turn, is regarded as the bedrock of the local system (Plees, 2005; Reynaert & Dobbelaere, 2012). As the focus of local democracy, the main function of *14/10* was therefore to select more than 13.000 councillors to form 589 local councils (Steyvers & Reynaert, 2010)².

Even when taking the weight of the elections into consideration, a few reservations are noteworthy. First, it was striking how the public attention (particularly in the national media) was seldom directed towards the councillors-to-be in person, or the councillor office by extension. Rather, the debate centred around more polarizing items such as the (direct) election of the mayor, the nationalization of the elections, the health of local finances, challenges for municipal policy, pre-electoral coalition agreements, post-electoral coalition formations and machinations, the implications of the results for national politics, etc³.

Second, once this election *tsunami* passed by and councillors, executive boards and mayors were installed in office, as it could have been predicted, local politics returned to the margin of public attention again. What then happens inside the town hall is belittled or dismissed as *church tower politics*, being more like folklore than real politics (Reynaert, 2000)⁴. Hence every six years, the sudden rise in election fever contrasts sharply with the relative lack of interest for what councillors do once they have been elected. Only in some exceptional cases and in the local media (including the local sections of the newspapers) do local politics continue to receive regular attention throughout the legislature. Yet when this is the case, the political process is mostly identified with (the actions of) the mayor and his/her aldermen (see Box 1.1)⁵.

² Simultaneously, 10 provincial councils, 9 district councils and 8 councils of the *Public Social Services Centre* were elected as well. The councillors from these institutions, however, fall beyond the scope of our study.

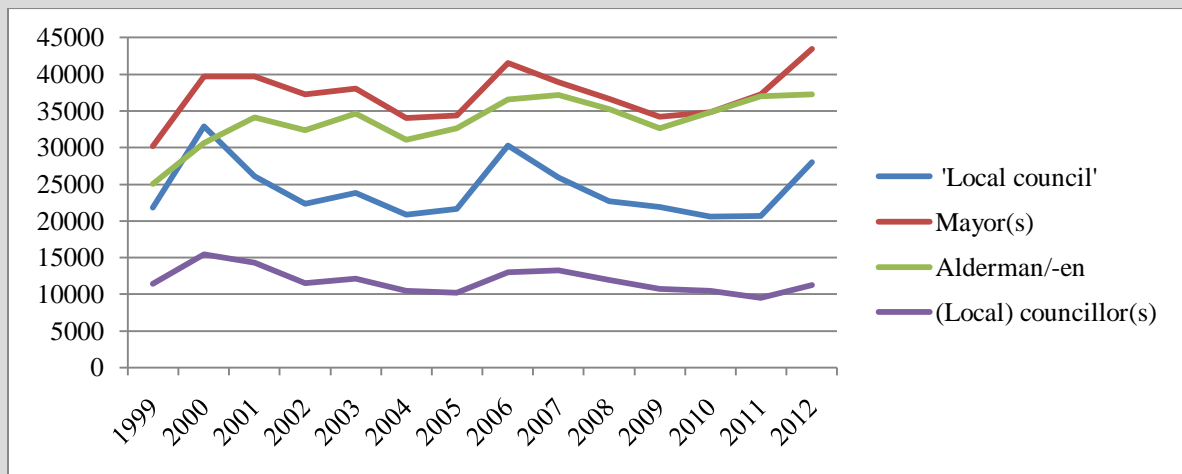
³ Debates on the number of candidates of foreign descent, single issue parties or single candidates were the exception that proved the rule. To some extent, this bias stems from the *broader* meaning of local elections, i.e. as the pathway to (local) power. From this perspective, elections determine the power balance between the parties, and indicate which future policies are broadly supported, who will have the political responsibility to implement them, and how the old policies have been evaluated, etc. (Steyvers & Reynaert, 2010).

⁴ For instance, a recent article about the training sessions for newly elected councillors in Flanders confirms this stereotype through its heading: “*Politics under the parish church tower*” (Justaert, 2012).

⁵ Examples from the recent political history in Belgium illustrate the polarization between councillors and mayors. On one hand, a quote of a political heavyweight from the green party, when leaving the national scene in 2010, exemplifies how councillors are (often) perceived: “*I stay a local councillor (...), but I have closed the political chapter in my life*” (De Lobel, 2010; translated quote from Dutch). On the other hand, several national politicians claimed to prefer the mayoralty in a (large) municipality over a mandate as minister or party president in the weeks before *14/10*.

Box 1.1. Media coverage of the local council and its actors⁶

We measured the media-coverage of the local council and its actors in 7 Flemish newspapers and magazines via the online archive *Mediargus*. The selected period (01/01/1999 – 31/12/2012) spans 2 legislatures and 3 elections (October 2000, 2006 and 2012). The blue line represents the coverage of the **council in general**. It includes every article in which the (Dutch translation of the) headword ‘local council(s)’ (“gemeenteraad(-en)”) occurred, i.e. including the terms ‘local elections’, ‘local councillor/s’, ‘local council meeting/s’, etc. The purple, green and red lines represent the coverage of the **council actors**: ‘(local) councillor/s’, ‘alderman/-men’ and ‘mayor(s)’.



- ☑ The graph shows that attention for the council increases markedly in the election year, whilst gradually declining afterwards. Throughout the legislature newspapers and magazines still report on the council, even if in their local/regional sections.
- ☑ Further, the graph highlights the massive gap in media attention between the councillor(s) and the omnipresent executive politicians, i.e. the mayor(s) and aldermen. The latter appear often in the media without reference to the council as such.
- ☑ Moreover, it seems as though media coverage of the councillors has decreased slightly in the past decade. We notice an opposite trend in the coverage of the executive politicians. Particularly aldermen receive increasing attention, almost closing the gap with mayors during the legislature.
- ☑ In the election year, however, media coverage of mayors still peaks much stronger. This could indicate that local elections are mainly (and increasingly) covered as a personal race for the mayoralty, rather than as the focus of local democracy in which the representative body of the locality is elected.

⁶ Based on Ackaert (2012). The selected media are ‘De Morgen’, ‘De Standaard’, ‘De Tijd’, ‘Gazet van Antwerpen’, ‘Het Belang van Limburg’, ‘Het Laatste Nieuws’, ‘Het Nieuwsblad’ and ‘Knack’.

As a result, it is unclear for many people what the role and position of local councillors is when they meet their election deadline (Reynaert & Dobbelaere, 2012). It is nonetheless from the elections onwards that councillors are really put to the test. As elected representative, the councillor is entrusted with the fundamental responsibility to run his/her municipality. Scholars agree that the present scope of this task reaches beyond the designation of *church tower politics* (Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010). Indeed, municipalities have been granted a general competence by the Belgian Constitution to carry out tasks to promote local interests, as long as these are not implemented at any other level (Ackaert, 2005; De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010). This includes a rich tapestry of policy domains in practice: public security, education, sports, culture, social policy, health care, environment, economy, urbanism, general administration, etc. (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010)⁷. By implementing these tasks municipalities are expected to contribute to the wellbeing of the citizens and the sustainable development of the municipal territory (Flemish *Municipal Decree*, Art. 2). The councils also have several tools at their disposal to achieve this end, such as administering the municipality's revenues, dispenses, public works and companies (Walloon *Code of Local Democracy and Decentralization*, Art. L1113-1). In this capacity, municipalities are definitely not a *second-class government* in Belgium. We should rather consider them as the *first administration and democratic base* of the political system (Reynaert, 2000; Steyvers, 2010a). Accordingly, the quote "*All politics is local*", expressed by the former American MP O'Neill, might have been slightly exaggerated, it does underscore the significance of local politics in our contemporary world (Steyvers, 2010a: 15).

Academics acknowledge the value of studying what happens *inside* the local authority as well:

"Local Government and Politics is not the subject that is at the forefront of everyone's mind when they think of political science. And yet "town hall politics" are the bedrock of political systems. One might well say that as municipalities go, so goes modern democracy. That is why the rigorous study of local government and politics is so important to our discipline" (Trent & Stein, 2006: 7).

In Belgian political science, attention for the local level has only proliferated in the last decades (Reynaert, 2000; Steyvers & Reynaert, 2010). Reynaert (2000; see also Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010) identifies five broad streams within this field of inquiry: research on local elections (the dominant stream, see also Buelens et al., 2008; Steyvers & Reynaert, 2010); research on coalition formation; research on municipal size and amalgamations (in

⁷ Still the authors note that these tasks are often shared with other government levels, while also being implemented under supervision of central government.

relation to public service provision and political participation); research on local policy and inter-governmental relations; and research on the social and professional background of local political elites. Recently, some new topics have been added to this agenda: research on political participation at the local level (e.g. Daemen & Ringeling, 2000; Pilet et al., 2007c; Verlet et al., 2007; Dezeure & De Rynck, 2010), research on local policy networks (e.g. De Rynck & Voets, 2006; Verhoest & De Meu, 2008; Block & Steyvers, 2011), research on political reforms (e.g. Pilet et al., 2005; Plees, 2005; Steen & Wille, 2005; Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Olislagers et al., 2008 and 2009) and research on political leadership (e.g. Ackaert, 2005, 2006a and 2006b; Steyvers, 2004; Steyvers et al., 2006 and 2008a; Valcke, 2010).

On the other hand, we still have little academic information about the *role and position* of Belgian local councillors in office (Ackaert, 2006b). While the research lines outlined above might relate to this subject implicitly or indirectly, they do not address it exclusively, directly and/or systematically. As a result, what we know about councillors' role and position is often derived from theoretical or indirect empirical sources (e.g. De Rynck, 2000, 2002 and 2007; Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Kalk & De Rynck, 2003; Ackaert, 2005 and 2006b; Plees, 2005). Tops and Zouridis (2002) argue that such underexposure is quite widespread. In the meantime, councils and councillors provoke mixed feelings: "*often maligned, sometimes loved, but above all misunderstood*" (Tops & Zouridis, 2002: 15, translated from Dutch). These feelings suggest that most observers think and talk about the local council and its councillors in normative terms. They are seldom evaluated from a descriptive perspective⁸.

The goal of our study is to fill a part of this lacuna by investigating the role and position of Belgian local councillors from a descriptive and empirical perspective. As such, we wish to look beyond the ballot, away from the (traditional political) limelight. In doing so, we will pose and examine a wide range of questions: 'How do local councillors move to and in their office?'; 'How do they conceive and implement their role?'; 'Which differences exist among local councillors?'; 'Which factors determine councillors' functioning?'; 'How do local councillors relate to citizens?'; 'Do Flemish councillors differ systematically from Walloon councillors?'; 'How do councillors evaluate their position in the local authority?'; etc.

This introductory chapter further outlines the research problem that forms the theoretical basis of our research. Subsequently, it presents the overall research strategy and the fundamental research hypotheses.

⁸ Egner and Heinelt (2008) extrapolate this conclusion to (European) political science in general. In some particular national settings, however, studies on the role/position of local councillors have been carried out (e.g. Denters & De Jong, 1992; Rao et al., 1994; Rao, 1998; Hansen, 2005; Brugué & Vallès, 2005).

1.2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The choice to analyze the role and position of Belgian local councillors was not inspired by the public indifference and/or scientific-empirical lacuna solely. It was above all prompted by a fundamental research problem. Such a problem qualifies as a given question “*calling for a response in the form of scientific inquiry*” (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996: 52). Basically, our research problem results from the acclaimed friction between councillors’ important formal role and position in the local system (*the positive view*) and factors that (could) inhibit them from acting in line with these theoretical postulates (*the negative view*). These opposing views thereby epitomize the title of our study: ‘Are Belgian local councillors the symbolic foundation of our local democracy, or should we rather consider them to be its fragment?’ Moreover, the salience of this (acclaimed) friction has also led Belgian central government to take several measures in search for a reinvigoration of the local councils and the local councillors (*the voluntaristic view*). This section discusses these three elements that constitute our research problem and will consequently lead our analysis throughout the study. Yet first, it briefly sets forth the general perspective that we will use to examine councillors’ role and position.

1.2.1. *New institutionalism as general organizing perspective*

We draw on a new institutional perspective to frame the analysis of councillors’ role and position. New institutionalism, as Lowndes (2010: 71) notes, is “*concerned with the informal conventions of political life as well as with formal constitutions and organizational structures.*” It pays attention to the values and power relationships of/in the institutions, their *obstacles* and *opportunities*. In other words, new institutionalism is an organizing perspective which analyzes political behaviour within the contours of institutional facts and broader opportunity structures (Goodin & Klingemann in Lowndes, 2010). The fact that this perspective takes account of both formal institutions and informal attitudes and behaviour within a wider opportunity structure (i.e. the larger government context), makes it very suitable for contemporary political analysis (Heywood, 2002; Bara, 2009; Lowndes, 2010), and the study of political actors in particular (e.g. Norris, 1997; Cotta & Best, 2000; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002).

In the new institutional perspective institutions are not automatically equated with political organizations anymore. They are rather conceived as the *rules of the game* which direct individual actors in their behaviour (Lowndes, 2010). These rules may refer to formal arrangements (e.g. the rules laid down in laws) as well as informal ones. Yet we cannot interpret the latter too vaguely. Not every social fact is an institution or a(n)

(informal) rule. Lowndes (2010: 73-74) adopts the concept *standard operating procedures*, proposed by Hall, to define the informal institutional rules of the game. Standard operating procedures are more than *personal habits* or *rules of thumb*. They bear three basic characteristics: (a) they are specific to a particular context, (b) the actors within this context also recognize them in such a way and (c) they are tangible for the researcher⁹.

Thus, if we seek to understand the role and position of Belgian local councillors in practice, we must scrutinize the informal rules of the game that fit in this frame, in addition to the formal rules of Belgian local politics and its overarching opportunity structure. The remainder of the section discusses (the interplay of) these elements.

1.2.2. Councillors' formal role and position in the local system

We start the construction of our research problem with an overview of the formal conception of the role and position of the councillors in the Belgian local system. This theoretical basis consists of five steps: (a) first, we conceptualize the political system and its functions in general; (b) then, we interpret the surplus of the local system; (c) third, we turn to the classic orthodoxy on councillors' role and position as central actors in this system; (d) fourth, we specify the Belgian setting. The final part of the section (e) concludes the argument in a quote and symbolic example.

(a) The political system: conceptual framework and functions

At least formally, councillors are key actors in the political system on the local level. To grasp the substance and relevance of their place in, and contribution to this system as individual actors (i.e. the micro-level), we must therefore first understand how this system generally works (i.e. the macro-level). This is the purpose of the section. Besides, the theoretical framework will not only help us to frame and interpret our research problem, but it will also introduce many concepts that will be used throughout the study.

A standard general theory of the *political system* has been developed by David Easton (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Heywood, 2002; Devos, 2006a; Caramani, 2011). Easton's theory is conceived as a conceptual model or framework to empirically

⁹ Another pertinent distinction that encapsulates the difference between formal and informal rules is Ostrom's distinction between *rules in form* and *rules in use* (Lowndes, 2010).

analyze the political world (Deschouwer, 1993)¹⁰. Caramani (2011: 10) states that the concepts of the model have been generally accepted and widely applied in political research, insofar as they tend to be used even “*beyond quotation*” now. The main merit of Easton’s conceptual framework is that it allows the inclusion of all the actors and processes of a political system. Researchers may consequently rely on the model to consider and encompass many aspects of the political world in any given context (e.g. governments and institutions, processes of interaction, socialization, culture, communication, etc.; Heywood, 2002; Devos, 2006a; Caramani, 2011). This also suits our new institutional research approach that will focus on formal rules as well as informal ones in the broader opportunity structure of the Belgian system. Therefore, we apply the basic concepts and line of reasoning of Easton’s model as building blocks to underpin the arguments and analyses of our study.

Easton sees the political system as a structured set of agencies and institutions that have the decisive task of converting public demands and support (i.e. input) from the environment into the “*collective and authoritative allocation of values*” (i.e. output in the form of public policy). In doing so, the institutions and agencies shape their environment through the policy outputs in a feedback loop (Caramani, 2011; see Figure 1.1).

The central question that Easton addresses in his system theory asks how political systems survive (Deschouwer, 1993). In practice, the author contends, this is assured via a dynamic political process which consists of a series of interconnected actions. We will discuss the basic proceeding of this process below (based on Deschouwer, 1993; also Miller, 1971; Devos, 2006a)¹¹. The process is often triggered by a *disturbance* in the environment in which the system is embedded. This causes *stress* when the disturbance inhibits the system from reaching binding decisions (i.e. allocate the values) and/or securing that those decisions are accepted as binding (i.e. do this in an authoritative way). The solution for the political system is to respond to the stress by adapting itself.

Obviously, stress has to be communicated to the actors in the political system first. This *input* may take two basic forms: political demands and support. On one hand, stress is conveyed to the system through increasing demands (i.e. the idea that the authority should make binding decisions concerning a given problem). These may derive from actors in the environment of the system, as well as actors within the political system (i.e. *withinputs*). More specifically, the concept *demands* is used as an umbrella for all wishes (as varied as expectations, public opinion, motivations, interests, preferences and

¹⁰ A conceptual framework is appropriate for systematic empirical inquiry because it portrays political behaviour and presents explanations and predictions for empirical observations on a large scale (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996).

¹¹ Easton acknowledges that in practice, many of the concepts, interactions and processes overlap and intermingle. However, they are analytically distinct (Deschouwer, 1993).

ideologies) that are expressed so that they would be fulfilled by political action. Demands cause stress (i.e. *demand overload*) if they are too numerous (i.e. *volume overload*) or time-demanding (i.e. *content overload*) to be converted by the (available resources of the) system in policy decisions (i.e. *output failure*). Additionally, unfulfilled demands may cause stress by reducing support for the system.

On the other hand, the system picks up stress through a decline in public support, either actively (i.e. visible activities) or passively (i.e. attitudes). This *support* can be specific or diffuse. Specific support results directly and visibly from the policy outputs that meet foregoing political demands. Diffuse support is less concrete and tangible. It implies an abstract sense of agreement with, or positive attitude towards the outputs. Such support is possibly directed at three components of the political system: the *political community*, the *regime* and the *authorities*. The political community qualifies as a group of people defined by the participation in a structured series of political processes. The regime encompasses the values and principles of the system, the daily formal and informal rules of the game and the authority structure. The authorities are identified as the actors who fulfil the authority roles. A decline in support for (some parts) of the system usually stems from output failure. The latter may occur when the system does not meet the expressed demands at all, when it does not anticipate future demands and/or when it does not fulfil the demands adequately.

The adaptive value of the political system consists mainly of its capacity to develop mechanisms that resolve the possible causes of stress outlined above. First, the system might seek to resolve the demand overload. A possible solution is to regulate the conversion of wishes into concrete political demands by structural and cultural mechanisms. The former refer to the formal rules and structural role differentiations, which enable some actors (e.g. political parties, councillors, interest groups, opinion leaders, etc.) to play the role of a *gatekeeper* who regulates the input in the political system. The latter are informal norms, attitudes and orientations of the system which determine how these mechanisms operate. Furthermore in practice, the demands are often collected and combined whilst flowing in the system through organized information channels.

Second, the system can turn to three fundamental mechanisms to increase support. It can generate more specific support through concrete policy outputs that fulfil the matching needs on the input side of the system. The system may also try to generate diffuse support over the long haul by strengthening the bonds with the political community, emphasize the general interest over particular needs and enhance the belief in its legitimacy¹².

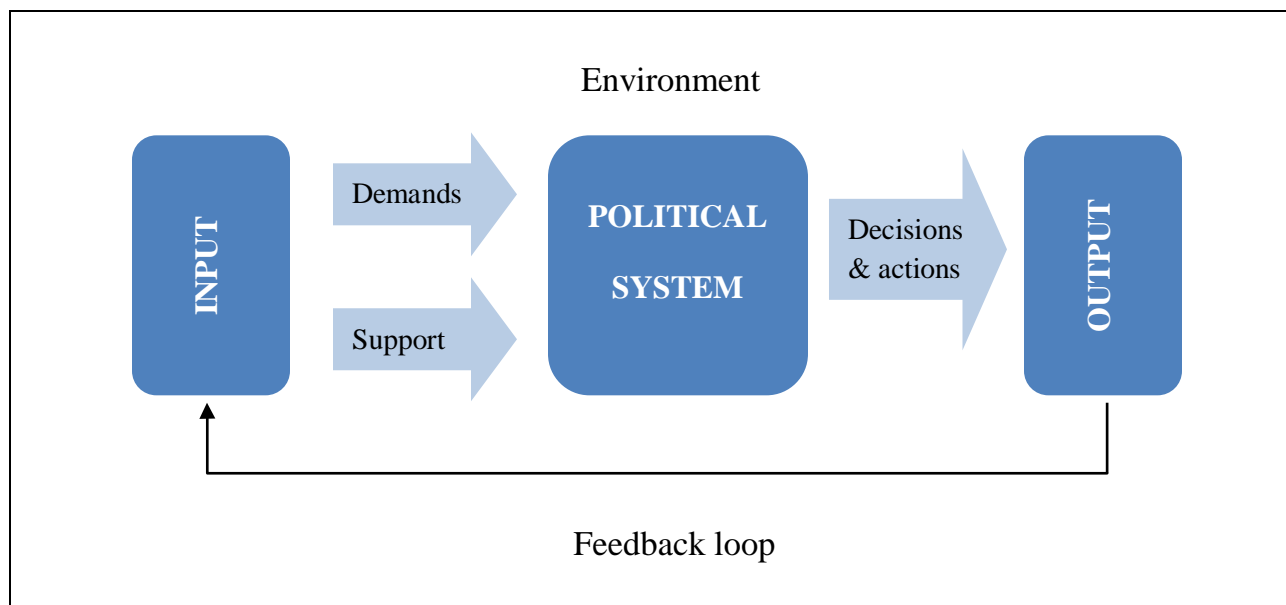
¹² Legitimacy may have an ideological source (i.e. operational ideals and values), a structural source (i.e. the roles and functioning of the system) and a personal source (i.e. the person who holds the office).

Finally in the last resort, the system can use coercion and/or introduce structural changes (e.g. via jurisprudence, regime norms, etc.) as a means to increase support.

In sum, the response of the system consists of producing different *outputs* directed at the world inside and outside the political system. As such, the outputs react on stress from the environment while aiming to impact on the environment on the turn. Outputs exist in four forms: binding verbal outputs (e.g. laws), binding tangible or intangible activities (e.g. services such as roads, order and safety), associated verbal outputs (e.g. speeches) and associated activities (e.g. flanking facilities).

Finally, the way in which the outputs affect the political system is depicted by the concept *feedback loop*. The outputs and their specific outcomes are not the final point of the political process, but impact on the environment as well. Consequently, the members of the political system respond to these stimuli by changing their demands and/or support. The latter then flows back into the political system through communication. The last step is that the political system may (or may not) react to this feedback with new output. In this way, the feedback loop illustrates the continuous process of adaptation by tuning the policy outputs in line with inputs from society.

Figure 1.1. Easton's conceptual framework of the political system



(Based on Deschouwer, 1993: 15; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996: 39 and Caramani, 2011: 10)

In short, the political system thus converts input from society into output for society. It picks up the needs and demands from the citizens to act and decide on policies that are offered to fulfil citizens' needs and demands, hence generating public support. Consequently, the political system is widely judged by the extent to which it succeeds in fulfilling both functions in the Western world (Scharpf, 1999; Vetter & Kersting, 2003a; Steyvers et al., 2006). The criteria used to evaluate these functions can be derived from the global definition of democracy as “*government of the people, by the people, and for the people*” (Heywood, 2002: 68). The input function of the political system represents the idea of government *by* the people (Scharpf, 1999). It is fulfilled when public choices reflect the preferences of society. Such responsiveness is underpinned and evaluated by the integration and participation of citizens in the political process (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a). Simultaneously at the other end of the system, the output function represents the idea of government *for* the people (Scharpf, 1999). The implementation of this function is connected to the effective promotion of welfare in society. This perspective is supported and evaluated by the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a). Finally, some authors also refer to the throughput function of the system as a third and complementary perspective (Haus & Heinelt, 2005; Bekkers & Edwards, 2007). This perspective focuses on the quality of the rules that structure the process of decision-making. It is based and evaluated in terms of transparency and accountability. As such, this function may indicate how government *of* the people should be organized. It focuses on what happens inside the political system when translating citizen input into policy output.

(b) The surplus of the local system

Essentially, the political system at the local level has the same structure as the political system at other government levels (Judge, 1999; John 2006). When it comes to optimizing the input and the output function, many researchers, following the ideas of Mill, even underline the specific surplus of the local system (Stoker, 1996; Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998; Steyvers et al., 2006, 2007 and 2008b). This surplus essentially emanates from its position as the closest political level to the citizens (Judge, 1999; John, 2001; Vetter & Kersting, 2003b; Steyvers et al., 2006)¹³.

Regarding the democratic earmark on the input side, scholars claim that the room for participation and education of citizens in the political process is particularly vibrant at the local level (Sharpe, 1970; Stoker, 1996; De Rynck & Bouckaert, 2000). The former aspect implies that citizens face a lower threshold to enter politics actively and/or contact politicians and influence policies which have a direct impact on their lives more passively

¹³ This idea is commonly framed as the *grass roots* notion of democracy (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002).

(Phillips, 1996; Boogers, 2007). The latter holds that the local arena allows citizens to comprehend the system and develop political skills on a smaller scale (Boogers, 2007; Steyvers, 2010a). In the same line of thinking, local democracy is often used as a laboratory to test new democratic practices – as the need for renovation tends to come to the surface at the local level first (Maes, 1997; Vetter & Kersting, 2003b; Pilet et al., 2005; Boogers, 2007).

In addition to this surplus on the input side of the system, it is argued that the local system holds the capacity to deliver public services more efficiently and effectively on the output side as well (Sharpe, 1970; Stoker, 1996; De Rynck & Bouckaert, 2000). Indeed, the local system can rely on local capacity (i.e. the multifunctional and integrative character of local government), local knowledge (i.e. detecting local needs and problems) and local interests (i.e. the optimal territorial bond between the profits of public services, the taxes paid for it and the accountability afterwards) to produce optimal public services (Steyvers, 2010a)¹⁴.

(c) Councillors' role and position in the local system: the classic orthodoxy

Now that we have outlined the theoretical functions and proceedings of the political system as the frame of our research on the macro-level, as well as the specific surplus of the *local* system, we can go on to specify the role and position of the local councillors as central actors of this system on the micro-level. In Easton's conceptual model, it is mainly the political regime of the system that formally determines the behaviour of the actors (i.e. authorities) in it. This regime is installed to govern over the community. It includes the systems' (a) general values and principles, (b) formal and informal rules of the game and (c) authority structure (Deschouwer, 1993).

The *general values and principles* of the system demarcate the domain of the public debate and the broad contours of its policies. Most Western countries organize their local system on the base of representative democracy and its corresponding principles (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Haus & Sweeting, 2006a and 2006b; Steyvers et al., 2007; De Groot et al., 2010)¹⁵. They believe that the interests of the community are served best via

¹⁴ A third surplus of the local system is termed in the concepts *pluralism* and *liberty*, later also framed as *local autonomy* (Sharpe, 1970; Stoker, 1996; De Rynck & Bouckaert, 2000; Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Boogers, 2007; Steyvers, 2010a). This perspective emphasizes the value of the local system *per se*. According to Pratchett (2004), this value is threefold. First, it entails local *freedom* and discretion *from* central government. Second, local autonomy implies *freedom* to tailor policies to the specific local needs. Finally from a bottom-up perspective, local autonomy refers more generally to “*the capacity to define and express local identity through political activity*” (Pratchett, 2004: 366).

¹⁵ Hendriks (2002) even argues that many authors consider the institutionalization of representative democracy as one of the major accomplishments of Western culture.

the transfer of authority to a selection of elected representatives. These representatives debate and decide on the public cause in the name of the local community.

The representative model is founded on free and frequent competitive elections. Via such elections citizens authorize and mandate a selection of their peers to run the political system on their behalf (Stewart, 1991; Beetham, 1996). The principle of political equality guarantees that each citizen has an equal voice in this process, as well as the same (formal) chance to participate in it (Beetham, 1996; Larsen, 2005). At the local level, equality is expressed by the ideal-typical principle of the layman rule, i.e. the active and intensive involvement of elected citizens in the process of decision-making (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). Accordingly, the ideal-typical image of the local councillor is that of the amateur, part-time politician who devotes him/herself to the higher public cause (Berg & Rao, 2005; Larsen, 2005; Steyvers et al., 2007). This principle entails that the council should not become a genuine class of professional politicians who need specific skills or competences (Larsen, 2005). Rather, it should consist of *common*, average citizens who remain embedded in, and consequently in touch with, local society (Steen & Wille, 2005; Boogers, 2007; Pruim, 2010).

On the basis of these values and principles the system is further shaped by *formal and informal rules* which determine how the actors (may, or should) behave in the political system (Deschouwer, 1993). The typical conception of the local system consists of a political component (i.e. local government) and an administrative component (i.e. the municipal officers). The councillors comprise the central institution of the political component: the local council. In their capacity as elected representatives, councillors are responsible for local governments' capacity to express local *voice* and exercise local *choice* (Stewart, 1991). This entails that they are not just the main products, but also the main producers of democracy (Cotta & Best, 2000).

The role of councillors is thus twofold (Denters & De Jong, 1992; Hansen, 2001; Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Tops & Zouridis, 2002; Berg & Rao, 2005)¹⁶. The first aspect implies that they should link the interests and opinions of citizens to local government. What this boils down to in practice is that councillors pick up needs and demands from society, consider them from different perspectives, weigh up the pros and cons of each perspective and aggregate them in the optimal policy compromise (Hansen, 2001). Hence, councillors' first task refers to the input function of the political system. In addition to this *external* position on the border between society and the political institutions of the local system, councillors have an *internal* position inside the architecture of the political system (Cotta & Best, 2000). This position refers to

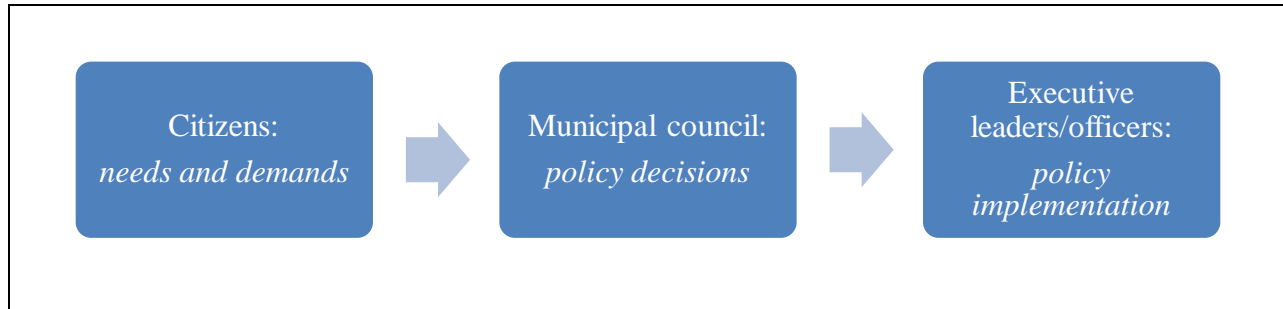
¹⁶ The formal rules do not distinguish between councillors on the individual plan (Dezeure & De Rynck, 2010). Ideal-typically, every councillor should thus contribute to the basic tasks of the council (Stewart, 1991). This equality is ultimately reflected by the equal weight of councillors' votes (Hansen, 2005).

councillors' task of running the municipality. It implies that councillors should give direction to the municipality as an entity of public service delivery (Denters & De Jong, 1992; Hansen, 2001). To this end councillors determine the main goals of municipal policy and control their implementation afterwards (De Rynck, 2000; Steen & Wille, 2005; Boogers, 2007). As such, councillors substantiate the output function of the political system as well¹⁷.

Finally, councillors' position in the system stems from the *authority structure*, i.e. the differentiation and corresponding power and responsibility of the actors (Deschouwer, 1993). With regard to this position, the traditional orthodoxy envisages the local council as the pivot of a clearly defined authority structure and role differentiation. It derives from what Dearlove called *the electoral chain of command* in representative democracy (Denters, 2005; Denters & Rose, 2005; Steyvers et al., 2007; De Groot et al., 2010; see Figure 1.2). Exactly because the council is the only directly elected institution in the system, it is placed at the top of the institutional pyramid of the regime, which is known as traditional local government (Stewart, 1991; Elzinga, 1998; Hendriks, 2002; Top & Zouridis, 2002; Steyvers et al., 2007). This position represents the notion of *political primacy* (De Rynck, 2002; Tops & Zouridis, 2002)¹⁸. Accordingly, local councillors form the starting point *and* the core of traditional representative democracy (Stewart, 1991; Pratchett & Wilson, 1996; Elzinga, 1998). In such a system, "*councillors – as popular representatives – are primarily responsible for translating local inputs (needs and demands) into authoritative decisions*" (Denters, 2005: 423). The council's authoritative decisions are subsequently executed by the executive leaders and the local officers (i.e. the municipal administration), who run the municipal system of in-house service provision as complementary authorities in the system.

¹⁷ The combination of the input function and output function via representation, policy-making and control is characteristic of any legislature in the political world (Kreppel, 2011).

¹⁸ Klijn and Skelcher (2007: 590) define political primacy as the principle which "*accords ultimate decision-making authority to elected politicians within a system of democracy.*"

Figure 1.2. The traditional model of representative democracy

(Denters, 2005: 423)

In practice, however, the municipal council does not operate in a monolithic way as it might have been suggested by the traditional model above. Several other authorities possibly diversify this general image. For instance, like any other assembly the council can establish ad hoc and/or standing committees which are concerned with policy preparation, discussion and control per (cluster of) policy theme(s). Such internal diversification allows councillors to specialize, gain expertise and focus in-depth on policy issues they are interested in and/or familiar with (Heywood, 2002). Additionally, several gatekeepers can structure the relation between the citizens and the council in the political system (Deschouwer, 1993). The local community could set up interest groups who mandate their own representatives to transfer needs and demands into the system on their behalf. Media and pertinent public opinion makers can exert a similar impact.

Yet undoubtedly, it is the political party that operates as the most influential gatekeeper in our Western democracies. Parties indeed are important intermediary channels between citizens and the political system (Putnam, 1976; Denters & Rose, 2005; Steyvers et al., 2007). Their function in the process is threefold (Devos, 2006b). First, parties engage with citizens via communication (meanwhile legitimating and democratizing the system), socialization, integration and mobilization. Parties thus enhance the democratic process from the political system downwards to society, and from society upwards to the political system. Second, parties exert a policy-making function via interest articulation and aggregation, policy support and design, and the articulation of controversial standpoints. Lastly, parties have a positional function in deciding who will occupy the authoritative positions in the political system. This function entails the recruitment, selection and instruction of candidates in order to obtain power. Taken together, parties are thus important gatekeepers in the system. They channel the input from society to the political system while leaving their mark on policy outputs in the system alike. We should, therefore, also consider the party and the party groups in the council as an important authority and form of internal diversification in the council.

In summary, the council and the councillors are conceived as the engine of the political system in formal terms. This political system operates as an intricate set of relations and continuous interactions between multiple actors, which shape the political process each in its own capacity. As John (2006) indicates, these interactions and relations are not different from the national level. They basically run as follows: parties select candidates from between the citizens to hold office; a council of elected representative then debates the policy issues and takes policy decisions; these decisions are implemented by the executive structure and administered by the bureaucracy; in the meantime, interest groups seek to influence the decisions and citizens participate in the process; and finally, these citizens also consume the policy outputs.

(d) Councillors' role and position in the local system: the Belgian setting

Also in Belgium, the political regime of the local system is formally organized on both the principles and derived practices of representative democracy (Pilet et al., 2005). This means that the local council is conceived as the supreme political body of local government from a formal and theoretical point of view (Ackaert, 2005; Plees, 2005). Since the council is the only directly elected institution in the local authority, it has the ultimate responsibility of fulfilling the municipalities' core tasks as democratic base on the input side and first administration on the output side. The council is therefore empowered to "*decide on all matters of local interest*" and administer the delegated competences of general interest (Ackaert, 2005: 169).

For this purpose, all council members should fulfil their basic role-set of representation, policy-making and control (De Rynck, 2000; Kalk & De Rynck, 2003; Steen & Wille, 2005). Several instruments and provisions support the implementation of this role-set: public council meetings (at least ten times per year), the right to organize advisory boards, citizen consultation and other participatory devices, the right to convene the council and set the agenda, install standing committees, support party groups, plan strategic long-term policies and, ultimately, pass rules and regulations by majority vote, the right to pose oral and written questions, auditing, the right to inspect local administrative documents and visit municipal companies (Ackaert, 2005; Plees, 2005; Steen & Wille, 2005; see also *Section 1.2.4*).

Furthermore, the council should steer and control the institutions of local government which are responsible for the municipal policy outputs. The first institution is the executive board (i.e. the Board of Mayor and Aldermen, BMA)¹⁹. This board is installed to prepare and implement the council decisions, run the daily operation of the

¹⁹ In Wallonia the executive board is called the *Collège communal* (municipal college).

municipality and execute competences delegated by the council (Steen & Wille, 2005). The BMA counts between 2 and 10 aldermen plus the mayor²⁰. Aldermen are usually elected by the councillors amongst their members and distributed proportionally over the political majority in the council²¹. In Flanders and Brussels Capital, the mayor is (usually) nominated by the councillors amongst their members as well. He/she then has to be formally appointed by the central government afterwards. In Wallonia, the mayor is semi-directly elected (see also *Section 1.2.4*). In addition to the role as political leader of the majority, mayors hold some additional specific competences (e.g. ultimate responsibility for the local administration, policing, representative of central government) (Steyvers, 2010b). After their designation, the executive politicians retain their seats and votes in the council, the committees and the party group. This practice reflects the monistic conception of Belgian local government. Monism implies that executive power derives from the council, placing the executive board in a subordinate position in relation to the council (Elzinga, 1998; Wayenberg et al., 2010; see also *Section 1.2.3*).

The local administration tails the political process in the municipality. The administration consists of several institutions that are formally appointed and evaluated by the council. In its daily operation, the administration is steered by the executive board. The municipal secretary or CEO is the most important and influential figure in the administration (Ackaert, 2005). He/she forms the link between the political and administrative branch of local government. The task package of the CEO is extensive: he/she leads and coordinates the different administrative departments, is policy advisor and the municipality's notary (Steyvers & Bruneel, 2010). Another important figure in the municipal administration is the treasurer or financial director. He/she holds the official responsibility for the financial management of the municipality (Plees, 2005). In Flanders, every municipality is further obliged to install a management team or MAT (Steyvers & Bruneel, 2010). The MAT consists of the municipal CEO (who chairs the meeting) and the financial director plus some heads of department²². Its main goal is to promote the co-operation between the departments of the municipal administration in terms of policy preparation, implementation and evaluation. Furthermore, it watches the unity, quality and functioning of the municipal services, as well as the internal communication (Steyvers & Bruneel, 2010). Finally, the municipal administration counts professionally staffed departments that are responsible to carry out specific tasks of the municipality's in-house service provision (Plees, 2005; Steyvers & Bruneel, 2010).

²⁰ Except for the larger cities, the aldermen and mayors function as part-time politicians (Ackaert, 2005).

²¹ The BMA usually meets on a weekly basis and is chaired by the mayor. Formally, aldermen have no individual competences and all decisions are taken collectively in the collegiate body (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002; Plees, 2005; Wayenberg et al., 2010). The president of the *public social services centre* is incorporated in the BMA as well.

²² The mayor may be incorporated in the MAT as well, albeit without decisive voting right.

(e) Summary

The overview of the formal/theoretical organization of the Belgian system suggests that the local councillors hold a dominant position in the political system (see also Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Ackaert, 2005; Plees, 2005; Steen & Wille, 2005). As elected citizens, councillors thereby link the local community to the local authority. Simultaneously, they run the local system from the inside. Given this key role and position, we can nominate Belgian local councillors as the **foundation of local democracy**. The symbolic example in Box 1.2 and the following quotes synthesize this claim:

“(...) political activity at the outset is essentially a layman activity. The essence of democratic rule is that authority emanates from the people: from the citizens of a polity” (Larsen, 2005: 196). Accordingly, “councillors, as elected representatives, have a potentially rich and invigorating local contribution to make. (...) The role is a fundamental pillar of local government and democracy” (Stewart, 1991: 26). In doing so, “the council is responsible for anything that happens in the authority and all councillors share in that responsibility” (Stewart, 1991: 30).

Box 1.2. The *Kokpit*: the role and position of Belgian local councillors epitomized

The council chamber of Koksijde, a Flemish municipality by the coast, is portrayed on the cover of this book. This chamber is the showpiece of the new prestigious **town hall** that was built in 2007. We selected this picture because the concept of the building aptly represents the value of local government, as well as the role and position of local councillors within. The town hall consists of two rectangular wings that are connected by an atrium. Most offices of the municipal administration are located in the wings. The outside of the entire building is constructed in glass to underline the transparency and enhance the accessibility of local government. In front of the town hall is a square that can be used for public events.

The **council chamber** is located in the atrium between the wings, near the administration whilst keeping an open view on the municipality and the public square. Its elliptic construction is called the *Kokpit*. This name not only refers to the municipality Koksijde *per se*, but also to the cockpit of the helicopters for which Koksijde is well-known, as well as the arena in which the old cockfights were held. Accordingly, the *Kokpit* epitomizes the ideal-typical role and position of local councillors in their municipality. Councillors link the locality to the administration. Meanwhile, they are steering their municipality, shaping local policies in an open and lively public debate.

(Het Nieuwsblad, 2007; <http://inwoner.koksijde.be>; <http://www.sigma.be>)

1.2.3. A role and position under strain

However, there is a fair chance that people who are familiar with the daily routines of Belgian local government would not recognize or interpret the political system as it has been outlined in formal terms above. In terms of Easton's conceptual framework and the new institutional perspective, the main reason for this would be that there are some *disturbances* in the political system propelled by three sources of *stress*. In ascending order of scope, these sources of stress are: (a) an ingrained *obstacle* in the specific councillor office in the political system, (b) typical *informal rules of the game* in the aggregated Belgian setting, and (c) recent evolutions in the overarching *environment* or *opportunity structure* of the local system in general. Arguably, all these elements could challenge the ideal-typical role and position of the local councillor in Belgium. We will discuss them below, before summarizing the arguments in a quote and (symbolic) example (d).

(a) The ingrained 'obstacle': councillors' enduring dilemma dances

The first *disturbance* in the system that we wish to address is an inherent *obstacle* in the councillor office. The essence of the obstacle derives from what Goldsmith (1996: 174) phrased "*the fundamental dichotomy involved in reconciling the competing claims of local government to be both democratic and efficient.*" Indeed, the enduring challenge for a political system to perform and optimize its input and output function poses a *democratic dilemma* for government (Dahl, 1994; Judge, 1999). Since local councillors are the system's key actors in charge of implementing policy input and output, they have to find the appropriate balance between (the different aspects of) their roles as a result. The difficulties that this quest brings about have been aptly described by Tops and Zouridis (2002) as councillors' *enduring dilemma dances*. These dilemma dances are caused by the formal and informal rules of their office. They compel councillors to make constant choices on how to fulfil their office.

Councillors' most basic dilemma dance concerns their double role as a link between citizens and government (i.e. the input role) on the one hand, and governor of local affairs (i.e. the output role) on the other hand (Tops & Zouridis, 2002; see also Figure 1.3)²³. Some councillors prefer to commit themselves to mainly governing their municipality from the inside (i.e. emphasizing the output role). Above all, they are interested in setting

²³ Kalk and De Rynck (2003) have explained this dilemma dance with a metaphor on local councillors in the Netherlands and Flanders during the 1990s: 'Dutch councillors are mainly stuck with their noses in dossiers at the city hall. Flemish councillors, on the other hand, are stuck in the local bar, preoccupied with their system of *clientelism*. While Dutch councillors should mingle more with the local community, Flemish councillors should turn up more in the city hall.'

the main goals of local policy, understand policy dossiers and follow them throughout the policy cycle. The main advantage is that such councillors know the procedures of municipal policy-making and create stability and trust. They advocate *good governance*, are trustworthy, intelligent and consequent. For that reason *governors* receive much respect from the municipal administration. Yet on the other hand, if these councillors put too much emphasis on government and its procedures and bureaucratic rules, they might lose affinity with the general interest of society and loose public support. In the eyes of the citizens, these councillors have become true *bureaucrats*.

On the other hand, some councillors champion their role as representative of the citizens in the locality (i.e. emphasizing the input role). The main quality of these councillors is that they connect the issues that are on people's minds to the established world of government. Rather than striving for personal success, these representatives support local initiatives and bring them to the attention (and on the agenda) of the political world. Accordingly, such representatives are appreciated as *familiar councillors* by the citizens. However, when they have too many difficulties in dealing with the bureaucracy, and fail to translate the public signals in concrete policy terms, such representatives are often discarded as mere *populists* that cause *output failures*.

Figure 1.3. Councillors' dilemma dance between representation and governing

Dilemma	Representation	Governing
Positive	familiar councillor	good governance
Negative	populist	bureaucrat

(Tops & Zouridis, 2002: 62)

Other dilemma dances complement the above (based on Tops & Zouridis, 2002). For instance: which interests should a local councillor hold in mind, and subsequently pursue, with his or her actions? Some councillors have a political profile for the most part, while others lean more towards the general interest of the locality as a whole. The former group is mainly driven by its ideological belief, which often fits in with a particular political party. The party then functions as a gatekeeper that assembles, produces and directs demands into the system. In the council, such councillors fiercely defend their political vision in debates and interpellations. Yet some might feel that these councillors lack a broader scope on the needs of the locality. In other words, the political gatekeepers have narrowed down the input of demands into the system too much. The opposite group of

councillors feel that a councillor is elected to serve the public cause in all its facets. Therefore, such councillors always have the locality's general interest in mind. On the other hand, these a-political councillors might come across as rather *colourless* or undecided.

Another dilemma dance relates more to the way in which councillors fulfil their mandate. Some take a voluntaristic approach to it. They run the municipality top-down, following and implementing their political vision from above. People know what these directive councillors stand for. On the other hand, such councillors might be quite narrow-minded and tiresome. The opposite type of councillor governs in co-production with the citizens. In doing so, he or she generates public support and engagement. The process of decision-making may even be more important than the final outcome for him/her. The downside of this approach is that coproduction might lead to mediocrity, since it could hinder arriving at strong and visionary decisions²⁴.

Two further dilemma dances follow from the organization of the local council on the internal plan. The first concerns the style of the executive board. This board might work open and relaxed. Its executives are accessible for the other councillors, who are allowed to make a real contribution towards governing the municipality. On the downside, some would blame such a board for its lack of authority. The contrasting executive board holds true governmental power. This has the advantage of clarity and, often, effectiveness: people notice that things are moving in the city hall. Still for many, such a style might evoke the image of *arrogance of power*. The second internal dilemma dance relates to the style of the opposition in the council. On one hand, councillors from the opposition have a duty to oppose the political majority. However on the other hand, councillors from the opposition can work constructively during the course of policy-making as well. The advantage of the former style is that the councillors can keep the majority in check and alert. Yet likewise, it might invoke rigidity because some governments could become afraid of launching any substantial policy proposals in the future. The advantage of the latter style is that opposition councillors give a valued contribution to local government. Still if they fail to oppose the majority, such councillors might come across as ineffective in practice²⁵.

²⁴ Obviously, the first group will often launch *withinputs*. The opposite group more strictly conveys community input, preferably with further active involvement of citizens in this process too.

²⁵ A sixth dilemma dance crosscuts the other ones. It concerns the information whereupon councillors base their council work (Tops & Zouridis, 2002). At one extreme, councillors may use documents from the administration: these are rational and substantive, but might be too bureaucratic. At the other extreme, councillors can rely on information received from citizens: this information is relevant and true to life, but might be too *emotional*.

Following from the above discussion, it is clear that no textbook definition exists on *how to be the best local councillor possible*. In an ideal world, councillors would maximize both components of each dilemma. The councillor-in-office, however, is confronted with all sorts of interests, pressures, roles and tasks that force him or her to constantly make the most appropriate choice. Meanwhile, each choice has its pros and cons. In the most practical world, therefore, councillors should probably strive to find an equilibrium between the extremes of each dilemma. They might do this either personally or as an organized institution (e.g. the council as a whole, the party group). Depending on their personal preferences and capacities, but also the environment, councillors thus have to find the optimal solution for their enduring dilemma dances in office.

(b) Belgian politics: the ‘informal rules of the game’

A second possible source of *stress* for Belgian local councillors derives from two typical *informal rules of the game* (see Fiers, 2006). By impinging on councillors’ position, it is claimed that these rules have altered the authority structure in the local authority from far back in history. And as a further result, councillors’ political primacy has been called into question on a regular basis (De Rynck, 2002; Wayenberg et al., 2010).

The first example is the strong culture of *party loyalty and discipline* at the local level (Ackaert, 2005; also De Rynck, 2002; Steen & Wille, 2005; Wayenberg et al., 2010). In the foregoing theoretical framework we have indicated that the political system is largely structured by political parties as *gatekeepers* or intermediary channels who exert various functions in the local system. Parties may also have dysfunctions, however (Dewachter in Devos 2006b). The most important dysfunction in the context of our study is the (overwhelming degree of) politicizing or *partitocratizing*²⁶. This concept denotes the excessive penetration of political parties in all segments of society, to the extent that these parties have become the dominant institutions in the system.

The Belgian political system is widely considered as a true party government, *party-archy* or *partitocracy* (Devos, 2006b; De Winter & Dumont, 2006; Van Haute et al., 2012). In this system parties have a strong (and often decisive) voice in the political process (Dewachter, 2003; De Winter & Dumont, 2006). They dominate every link of the typical electoral chain of delegation/command, reducing the impact of the other actors such as the legislature and single politicians (De Winter & Dumont, 2006)²⁷. According

²⁶ The other dysfunctions are: the disintegration of society through the opposition of parties and their supporters, the reduction of pluralism, the rigidity of social development and the development of oligarchic party leaders (Dewachter in Devos 2006b).

²⁷ The authors see many causes of councillors’ subordination to the party: a lack of resources for single councillors (e.g. staff, offices), the liability to the coalition agreement, voting discipline, the legislative

to De Winter and Dumont (2006), excessive party dominance also furthers a decline in the system's legitimacy and governability – i.e. eroding the input and output functionality. And in spite of the distinctive nature of party politics in the municipality (see e.g. Boogers, 2007; Steyvers et al., 2008b), the essence of party government is thus also claimed to be reproduced at the local level. This means that councillors mainly have to obey the orders imposed from above, be it the council's party group or the party organization on the outside (Steyvers et al., 2010). Arguably, such an informal rule stresses councillors' formal role and position in the system.

The second ubiquitous *informal rule* is the *inverted power relation between the legislative branch and the executive branch* in Belgian (local) government²⁸. The formal authority structure of the Belgian system rests on a monistic base. It states that the council should instigate the policy process whilst holding the BMA to account for the implementation of its decisions and policy choices. Practice, however, is said to work exactly the other way around as the executives impose their dictates upon the council (Steen & Wille, 2005). The only remaining function of the councillors is then to ritually criticize or legitimize decisions that have already been taken elsewhere and beforehand (Reynaert et al., 2010; also De Rynck, 2002; Ackaert, 2005; De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; Steyvers et al., 2010). As such, the Belgian local system could qualify more as *inverted monism* in practice (Bakker et al., 1999; Wayenberg et al., 2010; see also Box 1.3)²⁹. Several reasons might underpin this executive dominance: the weekly contacts in the inner circle of the BMA, its information edge over the council, the better statute and salary of the executives, their stronger position in the party (because executives are often the candidates who received most personal votes in the election), the personal portfolios that aldermen manage despite the collegiate conception of the BMA, the council's lack of organization, etc. (De Rynck, 2002; Ackaert, 2005; Steen & Wille, 2005; Steyvers et al., 2010; Wayenberg et al., 2010)³⁰.

dominance of the executive, the possibility to impose sanctions on rebellions (e.g. warning, expulsion from the party group, etc.).

²⁸ On this subject, the Belgian system seems to deviate from the general trend discerned by Best and Cotta in their comparative study on recruitment in eleven European countries over 150 years (2000: 15): “*During the period examined, parliaments have generally moved from a position of limited influence upon the legitimization and recruitment of the governments to a position of dominance.*”

²⁹ This situation is an example of how councillors' dilemma dance regarding the style of the executive board can be settled disproportionately in favour of strong governance.

³⁰ Several models reflect the relation between the executive and legislative branch of local government (Steyvers & Bruneel, 2010). First, there is the legal/formal *board or secretary model*, in which the (collegiate) executive board steers the secretary. The latter directs the heads of department. The model is in practice overshadowed by the *alderman model*, however, in which aldermen (i.e. executive councillors) directly steer and dominate the heads of department. The CEO operates as information channel between the executive board and the administration. Finally, there is a *department heads or management team model*, in which the (collective) group of heads of department (led by the CEO) directly interacts with the (collective) executive board – this model is for instance pursued by the Flemish *Municipal Decree*.

Box 1.3. Monism versus dualism

The relation between the executive and the legislative body is often termed by the concepts *monism* and *dualism*. Bakker et al. (1999) and Elzinga (1998) propose the following constitutional/legal definitions when focussing on the government *system*:

Monism: (a) the competences of the executive body are mainly or entirely derived from the competences of the legislative body; (b) moreover, the members of the executive body are all or mainly appointed by the representative body and remain members of the latter (Bakker et al., 1999: 20). Hence in this system, (c) the local council holds the political primacy whilst steering and controlling the executive and the administration (Elzinga, 1998).

Dualism: (a) the executive and legislative body have their own competences assigned by law; (b) the members of the executive board are not part of the legislative body; and the members of the executive body may derive legitimacy from the legislative body or the voters separately (Bakker et al., 1999: 20). In this system, (c) the council's ultimate primacy over the executive makes way for coordination (Elzinga, 1998).

Still the authors acknowledge that local systems seldom correspond to these archetypes completely. Steen and Wille (2005), for instance, consider the Belgian system as a fusion of *personnel monism* and *functional dualism* (i.e. combining part (b) and (c) of the monism definition with part (a) of the dualism definition). Yet even these concepts do not entirely cover the complex reality. Indeed, the fact that the council holds a general competence actually represents the monistic conception of local government *functions*. On the other hand, the rule that the mayor still has to be formally appointed by central government in Flanders and Brussels Capital, whilst being semi-directly elected by the citizens in Wallonia, reflects a dualistic nuance in *personnel* terms (e.g. Elzinga, 1998).

Besides, the informal practice does not always aligns with the formal theory (Elzinga, 1998). We might therefore also use the concepts *monism* and *dualism* to denote the government *style* (Bakker et al., 1999). As a complement to the pure monistic and dualistic style, the authors thereby discern *reversed monism* as a possible third way. This concept implies that councillors barely succeed in initiating local policies or exerting power, even though the system is designed to be monistic. Councillors are instead subordinate to the aldermen, who develop policies autonomously in the executive board. Aldermen give feedback to the councillors in the party group, or at the very end of the policy process. Hence, they dominate councillors in the councils, in the committees and in the party groups (Bakker et al., 1999: 25).

(c) Evolutions in the local system's 'environment' or 'opportunity structure'

The third and final source of stress in our overview originates from the overarching environment or opportunity structure of the local system. In fact, it has been frequently reported that the latter has undergone several significant changes over the past decades. The *disturbance* caused by these changes has even created a *brave new world* for local government (Denters & Rose, 2005). We do not aim at presenting a full and detailed overview of all the changes. Rather, we purposively outline those elements that could produce *stress* on the political system, and consequently impact on the role and position of the local councillors. We have arranged them in two categories: stress caused by the relation of the councillors with the citizens and stress caused by councillors' relations inside the political system (see also Tops & Zouridis, 2002).

Stress caused by the relation between local councillors and citizens

First, the modernization of the individual or collective citizenry is said to have drastically *increased* the *demands* on the political system (Denters & Rose, 2005). This modernization has a substantive and a formal side to it. The substantive side implies that citizens expect more and more from the political system when it comes to the performance of the local government services they rely on (i.e. a possible *demand overload*). The formal side signifies that the increased educational level and personal skills of the citizens lead them to search for active ways of participating in the political process beyond the passive act of voting (i.e. *declining diffuse support for the principles of the political regime*). As such, we might say that (the performance of) the traditional local system (i.e. local government and in-house service production) is questioned in terms of its core values of democracy and efficiency (Stoker, 1996).

In response to citizens' demand to enhance the input and output functionality of the system, the system has adapted itself by initiating a wave of political and administrative reforms (i.e. *structural changes*) (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Vetter & Kersting, 2003a; Steyvers et al., 2005 and 2006). This wave has gradually complemented the prevailing *political regime* with other values and principles, formal and informal rules and authority structures. Haus and Sweeting (2006a and 2006b) discern three major forms that constitute a hybrid constellation at the local level: user or market democracy, participatory democracy and network democracy. All these forms could stress councillors' role and position in conveying public input into policy output to some extent.

- The primary goal of user/market democracy is to enhance local governments' *efficiency* in producing policy outputs (Haus & Sweeting, 2006a and 2006b). To this end citizens are treated as customers and policies are accommodated in relation to their demands. Outputs are measured and practices/principles of New Public Management incorporated. Amongst the latter, we may think of privatization and contracting out of services, public-private partnerships, agencies for service delivery, management-oriented governance (e.g. role separation between the political and administrative sphere, complaint management, benchmarking), global budgeting, etc. (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Vetter & Kersting, 2003a; Goldsmith, 2006; Steyvers et al., 2006).
- The participatory variant is above all directed at ameliorating political legitimacy on the input side of the system (Haus & Sweeting, 2006a and 2006b). It is built on the belief that decisions are taken more *democratically* when they evolve from deliberations between government and active citizens. A wide array of participatory devices has been installed: information and consultation procedures, local referenda, participatory budgeting, e-government, co-decision procedures, (semi-)direct election of mayors, etc. (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a; Steyvers et al., 2007).
- Finally, network democracy aims at promoting the *effectiveness* of decision-making in complex and interdependent environments (Haus & Sweeting, 2006a and 2006b). This perspective stresses that in the modern world, traditional government, market mechanisms or citizens cannot solve problems on their own. Instead, these problems require the flexible involvement of all the organizations that possess or control the necessary resources. As a consequence, policy is shaped in networks of different (often influential) actors.

Second, there is an acclaimed *loss of diffuse support* by the citizens for the current regime and authorities of the political system too (De Rynck, 2002)³¹. As formal key actors in this system, the councillors are clearly affected by such evolution. Many authors use the metaphor of the (widening) *gap* between citizens and politicians to depict this loss of support (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Tops & Zouridis, 2002; Thomassen & Esaiasson, 2006 in general; Deschouwer, 1998; Stouthuysen, 2002; Verlet et al., 2007; Wauters et al., 2010 for Belgium). Three indicators underscore the infamous gap: declining electoral turnout (the most active form of declining support), fading political trust (the most passive form of declining support) and waning party membership (Stouthuysen, 2002). We assess them in the Belgian context with a graph in Box 1.4.

³¹ Support for the *political community* as such, however, is still a typical benchmark of local democracy in Belgium.

- First, we address turnout in the local elections. It could be seen as a strong signal of distrust towards the political system if people forsake their basic right to vote (hence, participate in the system) (Deschouwer, 1998). Yet regarding turnout in the Belgian context, we have to consider the fact that compulsory voting is still in place. This system implies that turnout is mandatory, and citizens have to register in the official bureau on election day³². The effect of mandatory turnout could be compensated, however, by a higher degree of citizens who cast an invalid or blank vote (Deschouwer, 1998). Therefore, we add both categories of ‘no-voting’ in the graph.
- Second, we consider the trust in the democratic system in general. Arguably the most abstract form, a decline in this type of trust could provide the strongest argument to uphold the idea of a gap between citizens and politics (Deschouwer, 1998). Systematic large-scale measurements on this matter have been carried out by the EU’s Euro-barometer since 1976 (Stouthuysen, 2002). Our graph presents the results from Belgium: i.e. the proportion of Belgian citizens who are very/fairly satisfied with the way democracy works in their country³³.
- Third, we examine the number of party members as a possible indicator of the gap between citizens and politicians. Political parties have always played an important role in the political system as intermediary channels between citizens and politics (Deschouwer, 1998; De Rynck, 2002; Denters & Rose, 2005; Van Haute et al., 2012). As we have noted above, this is particularly the case in Belgium, where parties are fundamental pillars and gatekeepers of the political regime. However the demise or decline of parties has been debated for some decades now. The point is then raised that parties fail to aggregate public opinions (i.e. input) and convert them into public policy output (Deschouwer, 1998; Denters & Rose, 2005). An indication for this decline is, amongst others, seen in the decrease in party membership³⁴. This leads to a contradictory situation: while parties are becoming increasingly embedded in the state, their bond with society is assumed to deteriorate (Deschouwer, 1998; De Rynck, 2002). Ultimately, this could lead to strong *output failures*. Our graph represents the indicator ‘party membership’ in the form of the ratio of members of all Belgian parties to the total electorate (i.e. M/E, adopted from Deschouwer, 1998; Van Haute et al., 2012).

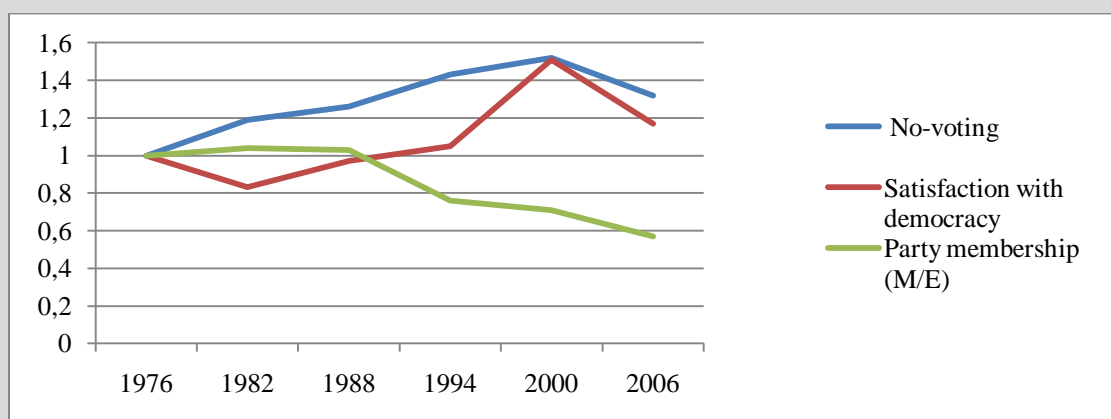
³² Still citizens who do not go out to vote are seldom penalized in practice (Deschouwer, 1998).

³³ Unfortunately, the Euro-barometer did not address public satisfaction with *local* democracy explicitly. Yet scholars traditionally believe that political trust is higher at the local level (Ackaert, 1996; Wauters et al., 2010). A national study in 2006 underscored this claim (Van Roosbroek & Van de Walle, 2006). In a list of 15 institutions, the local institutions (i.e. the mayor, municipal administration and municipal council) all ranked in the top-5.

³⁴ Other indicators are the growing success of non-conformist actions groups, declining party identification and growing electoral volatility (Deschouwer, 1998).

Box 1.4. The (widening) gap between citizens and politics?

To inspect the acclaimed gap between citizens and politics in Belgium, we present a graph comprising its three main indicators: ‘no-voting’ (i.e. the percentage of none participation plus invalid or blank votes in the local elections; data from Ackaert et al., 2007); ‘satisfaction with (Belgian) democracy’ (i.e. the percentage of citizens who are fairly/very satisfied with Belgian democracy; data from Euro-barometer) and ‘party membership’ in Belgium (i.e. the ratio of the total number of party members to the electorate as a whole, M/E; data from Van Haute et al., 2012). We consider the figures for the local election years from 1976 to 2006 (or the closest measurement – depending on the available data). For each indicator we equate the figure of 1976 with the index 1. Thereafter, this figure is used as the reference point for the subsequent data. As such, we are able to observe the longitudinal evolution per indicator and compare the strength and direction of the evolution between the indicators.



☑ First with regard to the percentage of **no-voting**, there seems to be an increase in the trend over the past decades. Still the absolute percentages are surely not alarming yet (evolving from 8.9% in 1976 to 11.7% in 2006) whilst the trend markedly declined in 2006 as well.

☑ Second, the graph does not hint at a growing **distrust in the democratic system** *per se*. Despite some fluctuations, the overall trend even seems to have gone upwards over the measured time. The absolute percentages are fairly reasonable as well (evolving from 53% satisfaction in 1976 to 62% in 2004).

☑ Third, the graph clearly demonstrates that **party membership** has decreased since the 1990s, thereby following a general trend in Europe (Van Haute et al., 2012). Also in absolute numbers, the M/E-ratio has dropped strongly from 8.81 in 1977 to 5.06 in 2007. This decline is mostly felt in the traditional, established parties (Van Haute et al., 2012).

☑ So generally, we do not find evidence for a *systematic* widening of the gap between citizens and politics *over the past decades*. As De Rynck (2002) and Stouthuysen (2002) argue, the legitimacy crisis appears to be mainly a crisis of the parties in Belgium.

Councillors' stress inside the local system

In addition to the stress caused by councillors' external role as link between citizens and the political system, councillors are stressed by several factors inside the local authority. A first group of challenges stem from *disturbances* at the macro-level of the system. Denters and Rose (2005) single out urbanization, globalization and Europeanization as three general forces that have a significant impact. Urbanization refers to the growing number of citizens who come to reside in an urban or metropolitan environment. The interconnectedness of people and their (increasing) needs and demands fosters institutional multiplication in the form of amalgamations, inter-municipal co-operations, introducing new tiers of government, etc. Globalization and Europeanization expand the urbanization perspective to include the connection of the metropolitan areas (be they large cities or regions) in larger networks. The increasing importance of the EU and international networks is claimed to reduce the traditional state power. Local authorities, in turn, seek for ways to influence the process of decision-making directly at these upper levels, while having to implement top-down initiatives from these levels as well.

The increasing size, scope, opportunities and importance of local government units vastly augment the workload of the municipality, and thus the possible *demand overload* for the councillors (Tops & Zouridis, 2002; Reynaert & Steyvers, 2006). Moreover, municipalities' task package is further enhanced by the aim of central government to deploy the municipalities as essential instruments of the welfare state (Steyvers et al., 2007; De Groot, 2009; Reynaert & Steyvers, 2010). In Belgium, this increase is accompanied by expanding regulation and functional supervision by the regions as supervising governments (De Ceuninck et al., 2005; De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; Wayenberg et al., 2010)³⁵.

Second, the professionalization of the local regime works as a challenge that adds to the stress on the councillors inside the political system. Professionalization is an internal adaptation of the system in order to cope with *demand overload* outlined above and prohibit the system from producing *output failures*. Mostly, it is directed at improving the *specific support* for the system and its outputs. Professionalization occurs at different levels. Partly due to the challenging and complex context discussed above, it is claimed that political leaders (i.e. mostly the mayors and executive councillors) and the administration, who operate on a (semi-)professional basis, gain more and more control over the process of policy-making to the detriment of the council and the non-executive councillors (see Tops & Zouridis, 2002; Berg & Rao, 2005; Denters, 2006; Egner & Heinelt, 2008; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008 in general; Ackaert, 2005; Plees 2005; De

³⁵ The *Policy-and-Management-Cycle*, which is to be introduced in Flemish municipalities from 2014 onwards, is a good example of this trend.

Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010 for Belgium). This could alter the authority structure in the local system substantially. Moreover if we consider the council composition over an extended period of time in personal terms, socio-demographic representativeness is also said to decline in favour of professionalization (Reynaert, 2000; De Rynck, 2002; Wayenberg et al., 2010). Such professionalized councillors are not genuine politicians but rather capitalize on specific skills and expertise (Tops & Zouridis, 2002). They are better educated, come from selective professions and/or are recruited and trained within the party ranks (Cotta & Best, 2000). Finally also in their careers, councillors may work more professionally, i.e. dedicating more time and efforts to the internal part of the office (Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). However, such professionalization might also narrow down the input from the community in the system too much. Besides, it obviously contradicts with the idealistic conception of the council as an elected assembly of amateurs who are placed at the helm of the representative system on the base of equality (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Larsen, 2005). Consequently, professionalization could bring about a decline in *diffuse support* and, as a result, produce *output failures*. Meanwhile, by modifying the fundamentals of the local system professionalization challenges the typical role and position of the councillors in it as well.

The response from the local system: from local government to local governance?

In response to the stress caused by the environment, the local system has adapted itself profoundly over the last decades. This adaptation has altered the political regime in terms of its core values and principles, formal and informal rules and authority structure. It also introduced new authorities into the system. This change has been termed as the evolution from the traditional regime of *local government* to the modern variant of *local governance* (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998; John, 2001; De Rynck, 2002; Denters & Rose, 2005; see also Box 1.5). In short, this evolution implies that decision-making is moved away from the traditional system to a broader and more flexible setting (De Rynck, 2002; Steyvers, 2010a). The former is based on the clear electoral chain of command that directs the institutions of traditional hierarchical local government and its in-house service production in the representative setting. As we have discussed above, councillors are envisaged as playing the first fiddle in such a system – which further includes the executive board, the mayor and the municipal administration. The latter setting entails the growing importance of a form of decision-making wherein different authorities (individual or collective; public, private or voluntary) engage on a loose and interchangeable basis. As a result, the attention in the process of decision-making shifts from the actions of the council(lors) and other traditional institutions to the actions of multiple actors in partnerships and networks that extend beyond traditional organizational structures (Denters & Rose, 2005; Hambleton, 2005).

Governance is thus “*the process that takes place in governance networks*” (Klijn, 2008: 511). Different examples of this regime have been mentioned above in this respect, stemming from different forms of democracy (e.g. networks, citizen participation, market democracy) and their corresponding practices (e.g. participatory budgeting, referenda, co-decision procedures, inter-municipal cooperation, PPS, strategic alliances, etc.). Many authors believe that governance places additional stress on the role and position of the councillors (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998; Denters & Rose, 2005; Benz & Papadopoulos, 2007; Steyvers et al., 2007). Indeed, councillors are no longer the *sovereign authority* in this new context as they were (supposed to be) in the classic model (Sörensen, 2006; Sörensen & Torfing, 2009). Besides, governance implies that councillors have to exchange their (preferred) task of mastering the daily and very operational provision of public services for the more abstract task of strategic policy steering (De Rynck, 2002). This task, however, seems far more suited to the likes of the political leaders and professional administrators in the local authority – two *authorities* that could already outshine councillors in traditional government (De Rynck, 2002; Sörensen, 2006). Moreover, the dominance of the executives is further enhanced by the (purposive) strengthening of political leadership in the governance regime (Berg & Rao, 2005; Larsen, 2005)³⁶.

³⁶ On the other hand, some also advocate a *new* role for councillors in governance processes – based on their position as the only elected actors in the process (Pratchett & Wilson, 1996; Hambleton, 2005). Essentially, this new role consists of facilitating and safeguarding the democratic process of decision-making in governance (Hansen, 2005; Sörensen, 2006; see also further *Chapter 3* and *Chapter 7*). Moreover, in many cases operational tasks can still be executed (and problems can still be solved) on the basis of the traditional logic of local government (De Rynck, 2002; Jacobsen, 2009; see also Box 1.5).

Box 1.5. Local government versus local governance

We may broadly define local governance as a “*polycentric system in which a variety of actors are engaged in local public decision-making processes*” (Denters, 2011: 313). As an **ideal-type**, local governance stems from four sequential and mutually reinforcing elements of change (John, 2001: 15-16): (a) institutional reforms (i.e. institutional multiplication in the form of new agencies and government levels; institutional restructuring in the form of PPP’s and contracting out), (b) new networks (i.e. horizontal networks between the state and private actors; cross-national networks between localities), (c) new policy initiatives (i.e. local innovation and capacity building to face complex problems; revived central state initiatives) and (d) responses to co-ordination and accountability dilemmas (i.e. new mechanisms to augment public control on, and accountability of, decision-making outside the classic representative arena; more pronounced executive leadership).

Accordingly, several characteristics set governance apart from government **in practice** (Benz & Papadopoulos, 2007: 2-3): (a) instead of complying with a clear hierarchy, several decision centres work together in networks; (b) the boundaries of these networks are functional and fluid, rather than territorial and fixed; (c) elected politicians are no longer the sole political actors, other public actors, experts and private actors are included as well; (d) actors may operate individually and collectively (e.g. interest groups); (e) control and coordination of policy-making is not only exerted by unilateral decisions, but often by negotiation; (f) decision-making is less formal and originates from less visible structures.

Still the rise of governance does not imply that old government structures are set to disappear completely or irreversibly. Indeed as Hambleton (2005: 194) puts it, government refers to “*the formal institutions of the state*” whilst governance “*involves government plus the looser processes of influencing and negotiating with a range of public and private sector agencies to achieve desired outcomes.*” In daily political practice, this means that traditional government structures and modern governance networks often **coexist and intermingle** (Jacobsen, 2009).

(d) Summary

The overview of the stress on the contemporary local system turns out to be quite pessimistic for local councillors in Belgium. In fact, they face a constant challenge to implement their role in the most optimal way. Meanwhile in the Belgian system, councillors' position at the top of the institutional pyramid is (allegedly) challenged by strong party discipline and executive dominance. And also in the wider opportunity structure, an interplay of evolutions (e.g. increasing citizens demands, diminishing citizen support, increasing system demands, professionalization, local governance, etc.) might further exacerbate the distortion between theory and practice. Taken together, councillors' position in the heart of the local system (i.e. *political primacy*) is called into question, as is their double role in it (i.e. linking citizens to government and running the system).

Following from this overview, we could hypothesize that Belgian local councillors do not function as the foundation, but rather as a **fragment of local democracy** in practice. Box 1.6 shows how attending a council meeting could aptly exemplify the lack of impact of the local base office (see also De Rynck, 2000; Tops & Zouridis, 2002). Additionally, the following quotes summarize the scepticism about the role and position of local councillors in twenty-first century:

“Heroic visions of councillor life have come under increasing scrutiny. (...) Sometimes, only a handful of politicians have enough information and oversight to be able to exert real influence” (Larsen, 2005: 200). Councillors “seem to be passive bystanders, while local politics and policy making goes on anywhere but at the level of central goal steering of local councils and councillors” (Hansen, 2001: 199). The result is that “councils may have become less attractive. Parties find it more difficult to recruit people to stand as candidates, as there is little prestige in being a councillor. Turnover between elections is high in some countries, and service as councillor has become less of a stepping-stone for obtaining political positions at regional or national level” (Larsen, 2005: 200).

Box 1.6. The council meeting: unveiling councillors' role and position in practice?

An impression of a council meeting in a medium-sized Flemish municipality in 2011 might illustrate the strain on councillors in practice. Obviously, this example is not illustrative of every meeting or every council. Still, it demonstrates how councillors' room for manoeuvre *might* be curtailed by executive dominance, mayoral entrepreneurialism, party discipline (as each party group votes with strict unanimity), and the multi-actor context in which some dossiers are settled outside the traditional structures of local government. We report on the council meeting in four phases.

☑ First, the council decides to add an **urgent topic** to the agenda. It concerns the municipalities' participation in a large financial inter-municipal structure which has come under severe pressure due to the financial crisis. The topic is discussed at the end of the meeting (i.e. approving the agenda and appointing a representative for the general meeting of the inter-municipal structure).

☑ Then, discussions are held about councillors' questions directed to the BMA. The opposition seizes this opportunity to make a statement on its core business via critical **questions about the current affairs** (e.g. traffic, public safety, etc.). The questions from majority councillors come across as opportunities for the aldermen (of the same party) to showcase a particular dossier of their portfolio (e.g. festivities, pollution).

☑ Subsequently, the council **votes** on topics that need clarification by the executive board without fundamental debate (e.g. street lights and names, spatial development, grants, bonuses for personnel, etc.). On most points the opposition agrees with the decisions. However, it does not agree with the BMA's method – as the latter is accused of using the council as a mere formality to pass decisions that have already been taken in advance (e.g. appointing representatives in inter-municipal co-operations).

☑ Thereafter, the council **debates** on the remaining topics of the agenda. Three topics stand out. The first is a large, important project on public infrastructure, co-funded by the public transport company and other governments. The opposition criticizes the expensive prestigious project upon which the council has little impact. An alderman and mayor defend the project by emphasizing the window of opportunity opened by the available co-funding. The second topic is an agreement with a private company and the public transport company. The opposition denounces the fact that information pamphlets were already distributed at the city hall while the council had yet to give its formal approval. The alderman admits that in such dossiers, it is often the public transport company which has the final say. The third topic concerns the application for a grant to hire experts who would counsel a large participation project. Again, the opposition accuses the BMA of having initiated and elaborated this expensive project without the council's awareness and approval beforehand. They discard the project as election propaganda. The mayor, who initiated the project, defends it as an attempt to enhance citizen involvement in the municipality. Despite fierce debate, all topics pass the **majority vote** in the end.

1.2.4. Institutional attempts to reinvigorate local councils and local councillors

Finally, the aforementioned formal orthodoxy and the acclaimed stress upon it are not the only elements that need to be taken into account in a current and realistic analysis on the role and position of Belgian local councillors. At the intersection of both we should consider a third aspect of the research problem. This aspect concerns *formal structural changes* by central government on the meso-level. The changes are designed explicitly to reinvigorate the traditional role and position of local councils and councillors on the micro-level in order to improve the performance of the political system on the macro-level. In this section we will discuss (a) the logic behind such a line of reform and (b) the Belgian implementation of it, before (c) concluding the argument in an exemplary quote.

(a) Reviving representative democracy

In many European countries, attempts have been made to improve the political system by adapting the classic representative base model in addition to the introduction of modern (forms of) citizen participation and New Public Management (De Rynck, 2002; De Groot, 2009; Steyvers et al., 2005 and 2007; Steyvers, 2010a). Such attempts were often various in outlook and objective (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a). For instance, they could include changes to the electoral laws with the intention of increasing turnout. Examples are found in personalizing the electoral system in order to enhance the impact of citizens' votes, e-governance (e.g. electronic voting) or reducing the voting age. With regard to this form, Belgium has introduced and encouraged electronic voting. Further, foreign citizens were enfranchised on certain conditions, the impact of personal votes was increased and gender quota was introduced to boost the participation of women in the political process.

More important in the context of our study, however, was the revision of the role of the local council and councillors as part of the reforms. The direction of this revision differed per country as well (Denters & Rose, 2005; De Groot, 2009; De Groot et al., 2010). In some countries (e.g. Poland and Germany), the introduction of a directly elected mayor caused a *de facto* decline in the council's power. In Italy, the impact of the council has even been deliberately curtailed in order to empower the directly elected mayor. Another group of countries (e.g. the Netherlands, the UK, the Nordic countries) sought to redefine and/or re-establish the roles of the council and the other actors in government. Belgium stood out from these countries by its explicit purpose of reinvigorating the traditional primacy of local councils and councillors through institutional innovation (Denters & Rose, 2005).

(b) Restoring the political primacy of the local councils and local councillors in Belgium

Until the start of the twenty-first century, the subordination of the local councils and councillors had almost been taken for granted by the Belgian government (De Rynck, 2002). It was the regionalization of the basic legislation on local government in 2001 that proved an important formal lever for a radical change of direction³⁷. From 1 January 2002 onwards, the regions Flanders (308 municipalities), Wallonia (262 municipalities) and Brussels Capital (19 municipalities) were entitled to organize and implement their own local government systems. The regions seized this opportunity to (try to) improve their political system at the local level. The Flemish region is considered as the forerunner in terms of the speed and impact of its new legislation. Wallonia is said to implement less drastic changes at a slower pace, while Brussels Capital is far behind the three regions in innovative terms (Wayenberg et al., 2010). A possible reason for the latter's restraint is its specific context, with very influential mayors and in-built mechanisms of linguistic balance between French-speakers and Dutch-speakers (Pilet et al., 2005; Wayenberg et al., 2010).

One of the key elements of the reforms has been the rehabilitation of the local councils and councillors. Indeed, the regions have acknowledged that a mismatch had developed between the formal rules of the game and the informal rules in practice. In the words of De Groot (2009: 14), the reforms consequently demonstrate how “*institutions change in response to their environments.*” We can discern two phases in the reform wave.

The first phase was integrated in the new local government acts (and their modifications) that the regions adopted in the wake of their newly granted competence. The new Flemish act (*the Municipal Decree*) was officially promulgated in 2005, the new act in Wallonia (*the Code of Local Democracy and Decentralization*) one year later, while Brussels Capital largely retained the old federal act (*the New Municipal Act*) (Wayenberg et al., 2010)³⁸. The Flemish *Decree* not only introduced elements of *New Public Management* and participatory democracy, it also sought to restore the primacy of the local council and strengthen the position of the councillors vis-à-vis the mayor, the executive board and the administration explicitly (Leterme & Keulen, 2005; Vlabest, 2011). The most important elements in this respect were the designation of the council

³⁷ Before this date, three competences had already been transferred from the federal state to the regional level as part of the state reforms: the supervision on the municipalities (1980), the municipal fund (1988) and the inter-municipal cooperation (1993) (Wayenberg et al., 2010). The 2001 state reform resulted from the *Lambermont Agreement* of 16 October 2000 and was enacted on 13 July 2001 (Steyvers & Reynaert, 2003).

³⁸ Dates refer to the publication in the Belgian law gazette. In 2004, the Walloon Code was introduced as a formalization of existing legislation. The political reforms were then incorporated in a revision of the *Code* that was officially promulgated in 2006 (Wayenberg et al., 2010).

president and the introduction of delegation rights (Olislagers et al., 2008). The former entails that mayors no longer automatically preside over the council – as this was the case before. The councillors obtained the right to elect a president who is no member of the executive board. This new *authority* was meant to foster an open and lively debate in the council, and a greater impact of the councillors. Additionally, the mayor and aldermen are no longer allowed to preside over council committees. The delegation right allowed the councillors to delegate detailed matters of local policy-making to the executive board. In this way, councillors gained more space and time to focus on their core tasks of representation, control and defining the general goals of local policy. The council was also expected to approve an internal deontological code and internal regulations. In addition to these rules of the game, the *Decree* lists the instruments provided to the councillors to fulfil their role (e.g. convene the council, set the agenda, ask questions, visit municipal agencies, consult official documents, ask for information, organize committees and citizen participation devices, etc.).

The Walloon *Code* was inspired by different principles. For instance, it did not strive for a management-oriented style of government at all, nor was it designed to improve citizen's participation in the political system (Pilet, 2008). Yet on the other hand, the *Code* sought to improve councillors' positions. Consequently, it mainly aimed at improving the democratic quality of local government, hanging on to the political primacy even more (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; Wayenberg et al., 2010). The two most important elements of renewal were the semi-direct election of the mayor and the introduction of councillors' right to cast a constructive no-confidence vote (Pilet, 2008). The main device of these elements was to reconsider the balance between the mayor, the council and the executive board in the political system. On one hand, the semi-direct election of the mayor means that the candidate who obtains most preferential votes on the strongest list of the political majority/coalition, becomes mayor automatically. This new designation method sought to create a parliamentary model which is based on a strong political leader. The mayor becomes a local quasi-president who can convert his/her electoral legitimacy in a stronger position in the executive board, meanwhile reducing the impact of political parties in the local process. On the other hand, strengthened political leadership goes hand in hand with strengthened control by the local assembly. A constructive no-confidence vote is meant to empower councillors to hold the mayor and the executives to account and bring the latter's (sense of) *sacrosanctity* to an end. The system implies that during the legislature councillors can dismiss an alderman, the mayor or the collective executive board by a simple majority vote. This vote should be accompanied however by the proposition of (a) replacement(s)³⁹. Finally, also the

³⁹ Additionally, there is also a possibility that the BMA resigns collectively (Bollen & Vander Borgh, 2012).

Walloon *Code* lists the further rights of the councillors (e.g. consultation, agenda-setting, information, visitation, questioning, committees, participation, etc.).

Nevertheless, observers were sceptical about the possibility of these reforms to effectively rehabilitate the local councils and councillors (Steyvers & Reynaert, 2003; Steen & Wille, 2005; Bataille et al., 2007; Pilet, 2008; Vlabest, 2011; Wayenberg et al., 2010; see also *Chapter 7*). Central government seemed to realize that more measures could be taken as well, and instigated a new round of reforms over the past years. In Flanders, the second reform phase figured as an element of the *Internal State Reform* of Flemish government. It was laid down in a revision of the *Municipal Decree* in 2012. The reform entailed, amongst others, the compulsory discussion of the policies of formal local governance networks in a council committee, a procedure to re-establish the governability of the municipality when there is a permanent conflict in the executive board⁴⁰, electronic information rights, more flexible possibilities for councillors to convene the council, reducing the number of aldermen with one from the next legislature onwards (Bourgeois, 2011).

In Wallonia, reforms were implemented as adaptations to the *Code of Local Democracy* in 2012 (Bollen & Vander Borgh, 2012). In addition to a stronger emphasis on citizen participation and the management of formal governance networks, some new elements were introduced regarding councils and councillors⁴¹. For instance, councillors' question rights were enlarged to include questions about the municipality's current affairs. A new formula also guaranteed better representation of the council's party groups in formal governance networks, as well as visit and reporting rights for the councillors who participate in the networks. By analogy with the Flemish *Decree*, the council became entitled to elect its own president (and committee presidents) as well. Further, some clarifications or detailed adaptations were made to the process of constructive no-confidence vote and the semi-direct election of the mayor (e.g. only use the *collective* no-confidence vote twice per legislature, allow semi-directly elected mayors who refuse the mayoral office to become an alderman if they had no position in the top-3 of their party list).

Lastly, also the Brussels Capital Region started (cautiously) to empower the local councils and local councillors. An edict of 2009 enhanced the role and independence of

⁴⁰ This provision is strongly regulated (only to be used once per legislature, not in the year before the local elections, the provincial governor has to mediate first).

⁴¹ The comment on these reforms by the *Union of Walloon Cities and Municipalities* (Bollen & Vander Borgh, 2012) illustrates the continuous tension between the quest for input and output legitimacy in the local system. Indeed, for the authors the costs of the new participation procedures in particular are difficult to reconcile with the pursuit of an efficient and effective governance style.

municipal committees (Schmidt, 2009). And in 2012, the council's right to elect its own president was introduced.

(c) Summary

The above overview of *structural changes* has illustrated that Belgian governments are well aware of the need to reinvigorate the local councils and local councillors as central authorities in the local system. Notwithstanding the inclination towards enhanced citizen participation on the input side and management-principles and practices on the output side, the governments feel that strengthening the traditional local regime would help to revive the democratic process as well. We summarize this attempt and its accompanying discourse with the following quote. It was expressed by the director of the *Flemish association of cities and municipalities* (VVSG) in his plea to rehabilitate the local councillor office:

“We need a wind of change to blow through the local councils. (...) More effort should be put in changing the political culture and strengthening the individual councillors. (...) The main goal of one’s political commitment should be to become a strong councillor, not an alderman. We should, therefore, revalue this role and function instead of conceiving it as a steppingstone to an executive office” (Suykens, 2012: 9, translated quote from Dutch).

1.3. RESEARCH STRATEGY AND FUNDAMENTAL RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

This chapter has put forward the fundamental research question of our study, which reads as follows: ‘*What is the contemporary role and position of Belgian local councillors in practice?*’ The elaboration of the research problem that underpins this question has generated two tentative and opposite answers. Both will guide and structure our analyses as fundamental research hypotheses in the study.

The null hypothesis originates from the classic orthodoxy on the role and position of local councillors in the local system. We find this orthodoxy in theoretical expositions, but also in the official discourse and policy initiatives of Belgian government. The orthodoxy postulates that councillors should function as the pivot of local democracy. The null hypothesis consequently states:

➤ H0: ‘*Belgian local councillors are the foundation of local democracy.*’

The opposite hypothesis voices the idea that the role and position of Belgian local councillors has been put under strain by a combination of possible causes, varying from general obstacles in the local system to the informal rules of the Belgian system and/or evolutions in the wider opportunity structure. As a consequence of this alleged strain, our opposite hypothesis states:

➤ *H1: ‘Belgian local councillors are fragments of local democracy.’*

Both fundamental hypotheses derive from the current state of the art with regard to the functioning of local councillors. However, the latter is mainly constructed normatively and has not yet been tested systematically and empirically. Our contribution to the state of the art is, therefore, to test these hypotheses on the basis of empirical, scientific inquiry. As such, we search for a *balanced and comprehensive* insight in the role and position of the Belgian local councillors.

This means first of all that we will refine and operationalize our fundamental research hypotheses. In fact, it is very likely that the image of the councillors as depicted by the symbol of the *Kokpit* on the one hand or the report of the council meeting on the other, is above all an extreme which does not necessarily cover all the aspects of councillors’ role and/or position in practice. We will pose several questions to nuance these fundamental hypotheses: ‘Is there a problem regarding councillors’ role and position?’; ‘How big is this problem, and what are its implications?’; ‘In which aspects of councillors’ role and position do the problems occur most?’; ‘Which factors cause the alleged problems?’; ‘How much variation is there in councillors’ role and position, and what determines the latter?’; etc.

Second, our research strategy implies that we focus on the local councillors in a direct, empirical and systematic way. The study draws on research data that have been collected amongst the Belgian local councillor population for this purpose. These data address a wide variety of sub-themes, allowing us to run several statistical analyses and construct a multifaceted picture of the contemporary situation as it is perceived by the councillors in person.

In sum, our aim is to consider the local political process beyond the ballot, away from the traditional limelight of political research and public attention. Our research strategy thereby holds the middle between the two extremes in political research: problem-driven research on the one hand and methods- and theory-driven research on the other (Baldersheim & Wollmann, 2006). The former type is concerned with important problems in the (political) reality. The research methods and theoretical points of departure are accommodated to the practical problem under study. Such problem-driven research is often ordered by governments in the format of particular policy evaluations,

advice and recommendations. The latter type places the analytical rules and explanatory methods first in striving for cumulative knowledge and general scientific insights⁴².

According to Baldersheim and Wollmann (2006), however, contemporary local government research often combines – and should combine – both extremes. Such research “*aims at testing theories on data that reflect practical problems and issues of the day or is motivated by a desire to develop theories that can make sense of current challenges*” (Baldersheim & Wollmann, 2006: 123). Our focus lies mainly on the first part of this statement. By testing political theories on the role and position of local councillors in the Belgian setting, we seek to gain knowledge on a practical issue or problem in Belgian local democracy. From this perspective, we should emphasize that our study is thus not directed at evaluating the institutional changes of central government vis-à-vis the councils and councillors as such. Likewise, its primary purpose is not to develop universal theories on councillors’ role and position either.

The remainder of the study counts seven parts. In *Chapter 2* we specify our research methodology, paying attention to the added value of the approach, as well as to its limitations. Subsequently, the empirical analyses each deal with a particular aspect of the research question. *Chapter 3* examines the recruitment process and the political career of the Belgian local councillors. *Chapter 4* tackles their classic role-orientation, while *Chapter 5* focuses more profoundly on councillors’ role as representative of the locality. *Chapter 6* then presents the role and position of the Belgian local councillors in a broader, international comparative perspective. In *Chapter 7* we bring these analyses together by drawing general conclusions, discussing their possible implications for Belgian local councillors in the future and raising some suggestions for further research. Finally, the *Appendices* compile additional secondary analyses and information.

⁴² Critics of this school argue that such analyses tend to be too sterile and fail to capture the complex reality and the broader perspective of the political world.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

2.1. INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The second chapter of our study is concerned with the general research methodology, defined by Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996: 13) as the “*system of explicit rules and procedures upon which research is based and against which claims for knowledge are evaluated.*” For Landman (2008: 17), the research methodology thus basically “*concerns the ways in which knowledge of the political world is acquired.*”

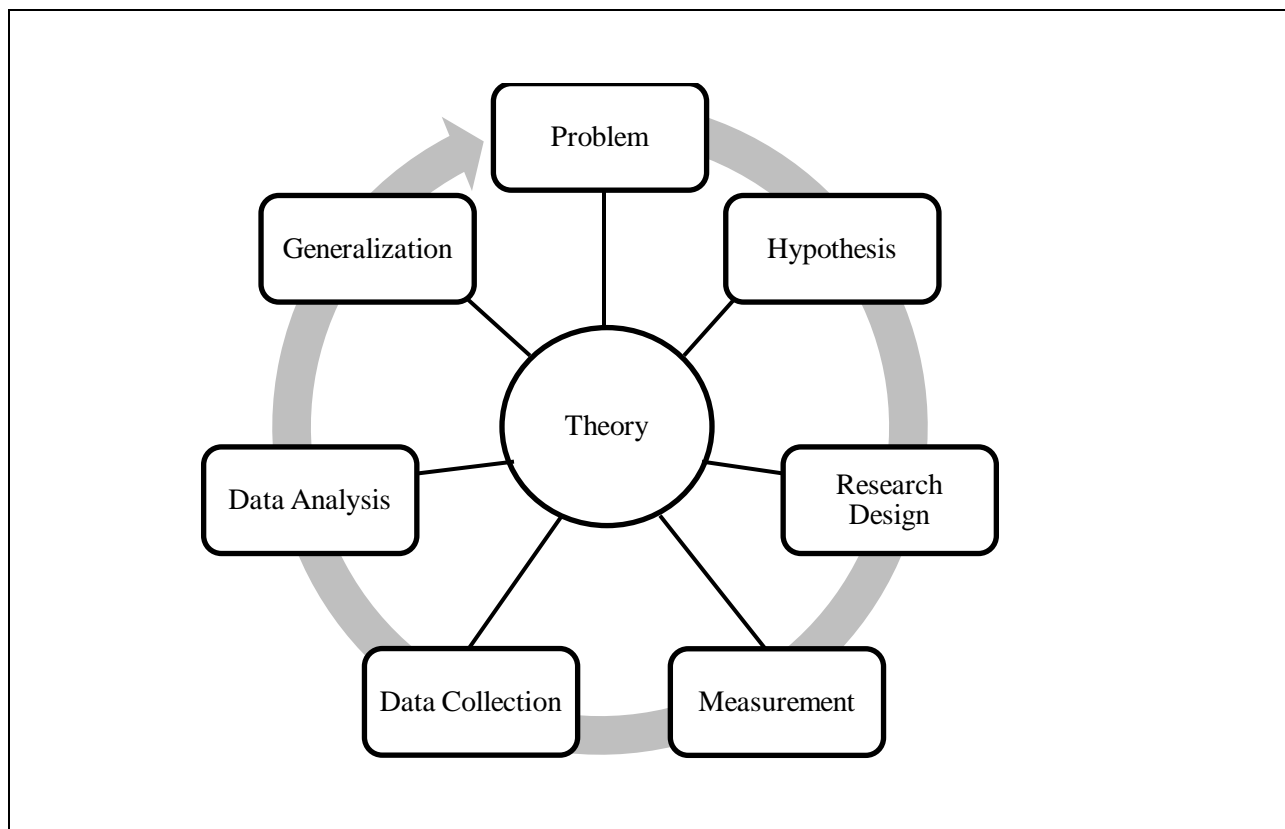
Even though such research of the political world is not a fixed and rigid process, it does draw upon some common steps and methodological issues (Theodoulou, 1999a). The choice for these steps and issues depends on the overall approach of research. In political science, the latter is usually normative (discussing what *should* be) and/or empirical (discussing what *is*) (O’Brien, 1999; Landman, 2008). The introductory chapter has shown that discussions about local councils and local councillors have been mainly embedded in the normative sphere thus far. Meanwhile, they often lacked a reliable systematic empirical basis – a claim that holds particularly true in the context of Belgian local government. Therefore, the main goal of our study is to fill a part of this empirical void. We aim to achieve this goal by describing the role and position of the local councillors in Belgium whilst looking for underlying patterns in, and explanations for, the results that come forward. Hence, our work primarily seeks to add to the descriptive and explanatory knowledge of the political world (Danziger, 1991). Regarding the third type of political knowledge, i.e. prescription, we refer to our general conclusion in *Chapter 7*, in where we connect our empirical results with the normative debate on local councillors by discussing some perspectives for the future.

In order to structure our study, we apply the general research methodology of deductive empirical research. This method is conceived as a cyclic process that tests theoretical claims on the basis of empirical analysis in seven stages, presented in Figure 2.1 below (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). The first two steps of the process, i.e. the research problem (*in casu* the acclaimed strain on the role and position of Belgian local

councillors) and the fundamental research hypotheses (*councillors are the foundation of local democracy* versus *councillors are fragments of local democracy*), were outlined in the foregoing introductory chapter. In this chapter, we focus on the subsequent phases: the research design, measurement, data collection and the basic principles of our data analysis. This forms the methodological platform for the specific data analyses that are presented in *Chapters 3 to 6*. Finally, the conclusive *Chapter 7* completes the research cycle by generalizing the empirical results to sow the seeds of further elaboration(s) in (a) new research cycle(s).

Prior to commencing with our discussion, the following section offers an orientation of the general setting in which our research has been conducted. In the final section of the chapter, we also reiterate the limitations of our methodological approach in general.

Figure 2.1. The main stages of the research process



(Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996: 20)

2.2. RESEARCH SETTING: THE MAELG PROJECT

The empirical results in our study are based on the Belgian contribution to a European comparative research project. In 2006, a number of scholars of the established research group *Euroloc* decided to extend their series of comparative local government study with a quantitative analysis of local councillors in Europe. As such, the Euroloc project completed the study of the “*local power triangle*”, consisting of the key administrator or CEO (addressed by the “*Udité Leadership Study*”, see Klausen & Magnier, 1998; Mouritzen & Svara, 2002), the political leader or mayor (addressed by the “*Polleader*” project, see Bäck et al., 2006) and the representative assembly or council (Egner et al., *forthcoming*). The project was titled *Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance*, or simply *MAELG*¹.

Sixteen countries participated in the project. They represent a fair extent of cultural and structural diversity in terms of local government. These countries are, in alphabetical order: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The common research strategy across these countries took shape in several workshops (Ghent 2006, Madrid 2008, Zurich 2009, Darmstadt 2010 and Madrid 2012). First, a standard survey and a corresponding SPSS data input-file were developed. The survey covered a wide array of councillor-related themes that suited the research interests of the different partners in the project (see further in *Section 2.5.1*). Per country, a group of scholars then translated and, if necessary, contextualized the basic version of the questionnaire (which was written in *generic* English). Given the comparative purpose of the project though, each country was asked to retain as many questions of the original standard version as possible. Furthermore in order to *compare the comparable*, the group decided to include councillors from municipalities with more than 10.000 inhabitants only². Subsequently, each country drew up a representative sample of councillors – often using a cluster sample of municipalities (Egner et al., *forthcoming*), and sent the questionnaires to the councillors of this sample.

The combination of this cross-national research framework/method with the national implementation and funding allowed the *MAELG* project to overcome the most important obstacles for systematic comparative local government research, i.e. the lack of large-scale co-funding and the tendency to focus on descriptive country reports or few-country

¹ Currently, a new comparative research project has been initiated by the Euroloc group under the header *Second tier of Local Government in Europe*. This project addresses the actors of the intermediate tier of government (*in casu* the governor, CEO, deputies and councillors of the (Belgian) provinces).

² In some countries (e.g. France, Italy), this threshold significantly narrowed down the scope of research. For the study at hand however, which is directed at gaining insights into the *general* population of the Belgian local councillors, we have included councillors from municipalities below this threshold in our survey (see *Section 2.5.2*).

comparisons as a consequence of the latter (John, 2006)³. The general results of the MAELG project are presented in the book *The European Councillor*, which is organized in several thematic chapters (Egner et al., *forthcoming*). Additionally, further in-depth thematic analyses were carried out and published in special issues of academic journals (see *Lex Localis – Journal of Local Self-Government*, 2012, 10 (1) and *Local Government Studies*, *iFirst*).

2.3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The third section of our methodological chapter sets forth the research design of the study, i.e. “*the logical structure of the research inquiry that the political scientist is engaged upon*” (Burnham et al., 2008: 39). Following from the general goal of research, the research design structures the analyses to obtain answers to the initial question(s). According to Burnham et al. (2008), the choice for a particular design is not only determined by objective criteria (‘Which research strategy is most likely to yield answers to the research question, and test the corresponding hypotheses?’) but also by the scientist’s personal interests, training and skills. Additionally, some practical limitations (e.g. available funding and/or time) must be taken into consideration.

Constructing a research design has two major purposes (Burnham et al., 2008). First, to draw up the operational research plan by developing specific researchable/measurable questions, key concepts and hypotheses whilst organizing them in a logical order. The second (and most familiar) function of the research design is to define the procedures which are applied within this plan to obtain valid and objective results.

2.3.1. Operational plan

The fundamental research question (FRQ) of our study has been phrased in the general introduction (*Chapter 1*) as follows: ‘What is the role and position of local councillors in contemporary Belgian local government’? We formulated tentative answers to this question in the form of two opposing hypotheses. The null hypothesis reads that *local councillors are the foundation of local democracy (H0)*. Its antipode holds that *local councillors are fragments of local democracy (H1)*. Since such metaphorical hypotheses are obviously too broad and vague to scrutinize empirically, the next step in the research process should specify them into researchable questions and operational hypotheses (Theodoulou, 1999a). Based on the theoretical starting point and ensuing research problems extracted from the literature review in *Chapter 1*, but also practical

³ The Belgian research was funded by the *Special Research Fund* of Ghent University.

considerations (e.g. the questionnaire developed by the *MAELG* project) and personal interest, we disentangle the FRQ and corresponding hypotheses into four specific themes. Each theme, in turn, includes a number of applied research questions (ARQ).

(a) Political recruitment and career

The first theme of our operational plan deals with the recruitment process and the political career of the local councillors (*Chapter 3*). Whereas the former concept refers to the route to the local base office, the latter denotes the way in which councillors give shape to it afterwards. Both aspects relate to the core of our democratic representative system, which states that citizens are to be ruled by their equals (see *Chapter 1*). In almost any local democracy, this principle is epitomized by the layman rule, i.e. the effective and intensive involvement of amateur politicians/citizens in the process of decision-making (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002)⁴. Regarding political recruitment and career, it implies openness and equality. Principally, “*any fellow-citizen should be able to come forward as a candidate for political office*” whilst afterwards, “*politics should not be a separate sphere of society*” (Steyvers & Verhelst, 2012: 4).

In political science, the above principles express the discussion on descriptive (or demographic/microcosmic) representation (Pitkin, 1967; Norris & Lovenduski, 1993). Descriptive representation entails that the assembly of elected representatives should comprise a cross-section or mirror of its locality. To put it simply: different groups of local society should be adequately represented in the council. The principle follows the assumption that *who governs, matters*, from either a symbolic/normative point of view, or a more functional counterpart⁵. Regarding the symbolic/normative side, descriptive representation appeals to general democratic feelings such as equity and fairness (Norris, 1997)⁶. These feelings assure the symbolic legitimacy of the representative body – and, subsequently, public support for the political system. In addition to these normative arguments, some claim that political recruitment and career also impact on the outcomes of public decision-making at the functional end of the political system. According to this view, different types of representatives could bring distinct priorities, perspectives, styles and behaviour to the political arena (Norris, 1997). A balanced council composition

⁴ As such, the layman concept refers to the statute of the councillor as *part of the people*, and not to its lack of competence (Pruim, 2010).

⁵ This statement, for instance, underpins the (sometimes contested) concept *politics of presence*. The concept states that on the basis of common life experiences and a subordinate position in society, certain subgroups (*in casu* often women or politicians from foreign descent) will be more prone to defend the interests of their subgroup in political office (Phillips in Wauters, 2010). Simultaneously, they could enhance the symbolic legitimacy of the system from the perspective of these subgroups.

⁶ It might also figure as the second-best option compared to the unfeasible ideal of direct democracy (Judge, 1999).

would then produce balanced policy outputs and prevent output failures. Besides, the amateur *citizen-councillor* who stands with his/her both feet in society should be better positioned to pick up pertinent public feelings, and express them in the political arena too (Petracca, 1991; Steen & Wille, 2005; Pruim, 2010).

The analysis in *Chapter 3* seeks to verify whether the recruitment process and political career of Belgian local councillors correspond to these idealistic postulates. In fact, in many (local) democracies an ongoing and far-reaching degree of professionalization is observed in political recruitment and career (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978; Cotta & Best, 2000; Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008; Steyvers & Verhelst, 2012). Professionalization implies that both components tend to be reduced to a selective and closed process, which is directed at bringing area-specific routines and expertise to the council to enhance its functional capacity (Steyvers & Verhelst, 2012). Obviously, the very essence of professionalization does not sit well with the ideal-typical layman rule. Its disputable connotation encapsulates “*the essence of the tension between the demand for calibre and the need for greater (‘sociological’) representation*” (Rao, 1998: 21). In addition to the descriptive reconstruction of councillors’ recruitment process and political career in terms of the layman-professional contraposition, the chapter searches for underlying patterns in the population of Belgian local councillors. Finally, the explanatory part of the analysis scrutinizes whether there is a path-dependent *funnel of professionalization*, leading from a professionalized recruitment process to a professionalized career later on.

(b) Classic role orientation

Our second research theme delves deeper into the centre of our research problem by scrutinizing the role orientation of the local councillors (*Chapter 4*). In a representative local democracy, the latter is an important aspect of the system’s performance. But as we have mentioned at the outset (*Chapter 1*), elected representatives are in a constant straddle between the local community on the one hand and the world of governance on the other (Denters & De Jong, 1992). Councillors should thus simultaneously represent the interests of local citizens in the political arena (i.e. conveying citizen input) while administering the local affairs (i.e. producing policy output). As such, their straddle covers the basic and classic role-set that comprises (1) representation, (2) policy-making and (3) policy control (De Rynck, 2000; Denters, 2005; Steen & Wille, 2005).

Chapter 4 focuses on several facets of this classic role-set. First, it assesses the role attitudes of the councillors, i.e. the degree to which they personally support the three roles under study. Such attitudes are not only important determinants for role behaviour in office (Denters & Klok, 2003), but may also provide clues for possible paths of

political reform if necessary (Denters & De Jong, 1992). Second, the chapter analyzes councillors' acclaimed role behaviour, i.e. the way in which councillors feel that they contribute to their classic role-set in practice. This second component will indicate whether or not Belgian local councillors (claim to) act as they are formally supposed to. Third, the chapter examines the role discrepancies experienced by the councillors in terms of representation, policy and control. The role discrepancy refers to the gap, or congruence, between councillors' role attitude (i.e. importance of the role) and role behaviour (i.e. acclaimed contribution to the role). This last component might also provide us with important information on the position of the local councillors in the system. Indeed, it will indicate whether councillors are able to implement their role as they would wish to, or whether certain factors impede them from doing so. Finally, the fourth component of the analysis seeks to clarify the general descriptive picture by looking for underlying mechanisms that account for the variation in the role attitude, behaviour and discrepancy of the councillors. The explanatory analysis selects three sets of possible determinants for this purpose: place, personal characteristics and the informal decision-making culture.

(c) Political representation

The third theme of the operational plan (*Chapter 5*) focuses on the way in which councillors envisage and (claim to) fulfil their mandate as elected representatives of the people⁷. As such, the chapter tackles substantive representation as the complementary side of the theoretical discussion on political representation. This perspective stresses “*what councillors do, and how they should act, rather than who they are*” (Rao, 1998: 35). One of the main causes of the perceived gap between citizens and politics, as well as the strain on the councillors, lays exactly in the fact that many citizens no longer feel represented by their representatives in a legitimate way (Pruim, 2010). Accordingly, the quality of substantive representation is as vital for the performance of the local system as its descriptive counterpart (Steyvers et al., 2007). Scholars of the substantive perspective summarize several reasons why their view should be preferred over the descriptive one. Basically, they claim that the latter often turns out to be impractical, undesirable and impossible (Judge, 1999). The first argument holds that elections are (too) complex instruments to generate representative assemblies altogether⁸. According to the second

⁷ In this way, the concept *political representation* differs from the *representational role* outlined in the previous operational theme. It reflects how councillors generally fulfil the mandate they have received from the community to run the political system (and this task, in turn, consists of representing citizen input, and defining and controlling policy output).

⁸ For instance, some electoral systems might give more weight to personal votes whilst others favour winning lists. In some systems particular list quota are obliged whereas this is not the case in others.

argument, the essence of political representation lies exactly in the division of political action through the specialization of a group of citizens who develop political skills. Hence, it is above all important to pay attention to the way in which these citizens take up their responsibility in practice. The third argument implies that there are simply too many relevant subgroups in society to be represented proportionally⁹.

In our empirical study, the first component of the analysis describes the attitudes of the Belgian local councillors towards substantive political representation. The subsequent analysis assesses their acclaimed behaviour. Finally, an explanatory analysis searches for variation in these attitudes and behaviour according to the political and personal profile of the councillors, their contact/communication pattern and the local government context.

(d) Comparative framing

The final part of the operational plan broadens and deepens the research scope developed hitherto (*Chapter 6*). On one hand, the research scope is widened in two ways. First, the chapter synthesizes some of the analyses that will have been carried out in the previous chapters whilst including some new facets, such as the self-placement in the local hierarchy, the relationship with citizens and citizen participation, and possible turnover motives¹⁰. As such, the analysis reconstructs a large part of the multifaceted cycle of the councillor to and in office. Second, the study takes an international comparative approach by comparing the results from Flemish and Walloon councillors to their French and Dutch colleagues (see also *Section 2.3.2*). Indeed as Keman (1999: 3) argues, “*the ‘art of comparing’ is (...) one of the most important cornerstones of the development of knowledge about society and politics and insights into what is going on (...).*” Within our frame of research, the international comparative approach might not only help us to generalize the findings. It also allows us to test the current hypothesis that local government (*in casu* the role and position of the councillors) on both sides of the Belgian language border has drifted apart towards the Dutch and French system respectively (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010)¹¹. Furthermore, the comparison might produce some clues

Besides, citizens do not (necessarily) have the need for descriptive representation when they cast their votes.

⁹ Furthermore, some authors question the acclaimed relation between the (personal) characteristics of the representatives and their subsequent behaviour in office, just as they question the conception of descriptive representation as being the second best solution compared to direct democracy (Andeweg, 2003).

¹⁰ Only the issue of substantive representation (*Chapter 5*) is not dealt with in the comparative study. This is mainly due to the complexity and specificity of its conceptual framework and corresponding operationalization, which makes it difficult to address this subject in a brief section of the chapter.

¹¹ For formal reasons (i.e. the format of the chapter as an independent academic paper), the chapter is developed from the starting point of this hypothesis.

on the future perspectives of the role and position of the Belgian local councillors, which we will discuss in *Chapter 7*.

On the other hand, the international comparative perspective compels us to deepen the research scope of the study. Indeed, given its dualistic structure only non-executive councillors were surveyed in the Netherlands. Moreover, the size-threshold set by the *MAELG* project confined the scope of the international study to the urban setting (i.e. municipalities that have at least 10.000 inhabitants). To maximize the comparability of our data, we will therefore limit our international comparison to the non-executive local councillors from an urban setting.

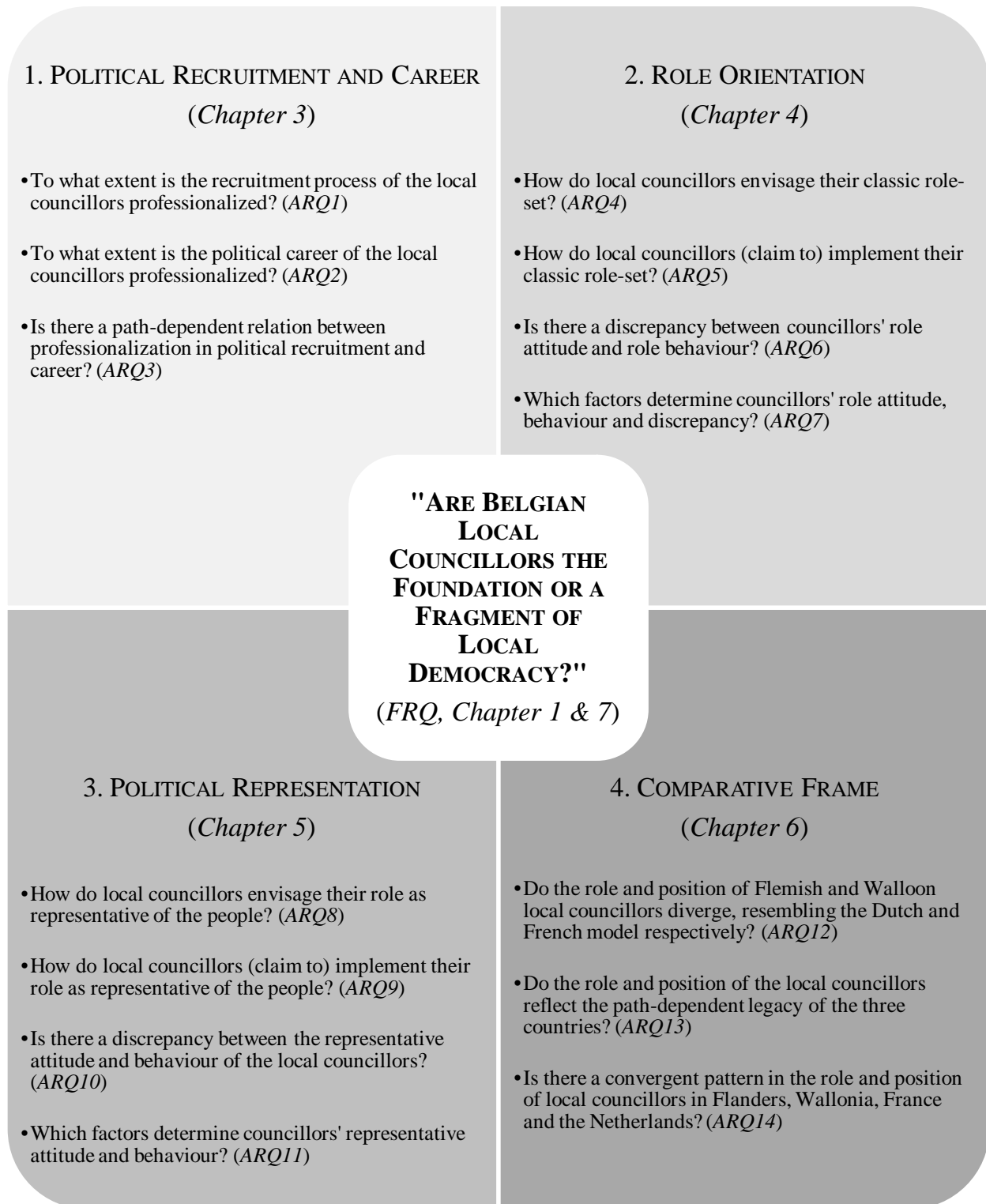
In summary, the comparative study focuses on the recruitment process, role orientation, self-placement in the local hierarchy, relation with citizens and citizen participation, and future political ambitions and turnover motives of non-executive urban councillors in Flanders, Wallonia, the Netherlands and France. In so doing, it raises three applied research questions: (1) ‘Have Flanders and Wallonia indeed diverged, following the path of their respective reference countries (i.e. the Netherlands and France)?’; (2) ‘Do the results from Belgium, France and the Netherlands reflect the path-dependent legacy of each system?’; and/or (3) ‘Do the results for the four regions/countries rather converge?’

(e) Summary

Through the interplay of these four themes, our operational plan seeks to present a broad, multifaceted picture of the role and position of the Belgian local councillors in relation to the research problem and the general research question outlined in *Chapter 1*¹². It tackles the characteristics and the functions of the councillors, their styles, their impact in the local authority and their relation with the citizens. Accordingly, the operational plan deals with different aspects of the councillor office on the input side, throughput side and output side of the political system. Figure 2.2 summarizes the different components of this operational plan. The four operational themes are presented in the format of an academic study per chapter. Obviously, each study further develops its own operationalization(s) and specific research hypotheses. If some extra analyses have been run in comparison with the original (published or reviewed) papers in order to contribute to the transversal story of the study, these are presented in the general appendices and/or added in a footnote to the chapter. All bibliographical references are presented at the end of the study.

¹² For an analysis or discussion of the interconnectedness of (some aspects of) this multifaceted research problem in other political systems, see e.g. Deters et al. (2005) or Drouin (2006).

Figure 2.2. Operational plan: FRQ, research themes and applied research questions



2.3.2. *Research procedure*

In light of the operational plan we have just set out, we will now expound on the most suitable research procedure to obtain tangible answers to the questions raised. The research procedure deals with two key questions: (a) ‘*Who* should we study?’ and (b) ‘*How* should this be done?’

The first question concerns the selection of the appropriate units of analysis (Landman, 2008). In our study, we are interested in the Belgian local councillors as key actors of local democracy¹³. We therefore choose to address these councillors directly and personally. Such an actor-centred approach is believed to be a valuable paradigm in contemporary local government research that is both theory- and problem-driven (Baldersheim & Wollmann, 2006). For us, it provides an opportunity to assemble the varied and extensive data called for by the operational plan (e.g. *neutral* information on councillors’ personal characteristics, as well as *subjective* information on role fulfilment, political representation, etc.). Meanwhile, the setting of the *MAELG* project has provided the practical opportunity to focus on the councillors. A final motive is theoretical. By inquiring local councillors as individual actors, our results will probably reflect their role and position in the wide context of contemporary local governance (i.e. including their experience in the council, but also in council committees, inter-municipal co-operations, the party group, informal interactions with citizens and the administration, etc.), rather than the narrow institutional and formal setting of the council as such.

The focus on the individual level, however, implies that the individualistic (or reductionist) fallacy is a possible research pitfall (Burnham et al., 2008; Landman, 2008). The individualistic fallacy implies that “*inferences about groups, societies, or nations are drawn directly from evidence gathered from individuals*” (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996: 55). In our research design, this means that we can draw valid conclusions about the population of local councillors in Belgium, rather than conclusions about the local councils or the local government system on the aggregate level.

The subsequent question of the research procedure addresses how these units of analysis can be surveyed in the most appropriate way. We opt for the quantitative method as basic approach. Quantitative research in social sciences aims at being objective and scientific through statistical analysis (Bara, 2009). Therefore, it tends to generate large amounts of data (the large-N design), which allow one to extrapolate the specific findings to a broader setting (Theodoulou, 1999b; Hopkin, 2010; John, 2010). In local government, the numerosity of possible research units (i.e. municipalities and/or municipal councillors) foster such large-N research in particular (John, 2006). Additionally, quantitative

¹³ This perspective is extended with councillors from France and the Netherlands in the comparative study.

research aims at reducing bias in the research process and identify relationships between the concepts and variables under study (Theodoulou, 1999b). Together these qualities make the quantitative strategy the most suitable one to study the population of Belgian local councillors across a wide variety of themes, while testing a set of general and applied research hypotheses. On the downside, and compared to the qualitative method as its analytical counterpart (Burnham et al., 2008; Landman, 2008; Bara, 2009; John, 2010), the quantitative method also has some limitations. As Bara (2009) and John (2010) point out, quantitative analysis produces only estimates or approximations of the complex reality in the political world. Scholars should therefore pay close attention to the process of data collection (*Section 2.5*) and the treatment of the data (*Section 2.4*) in order to minimize the distance between reality and its empirical observations. The limitations of our approach are also discussed further in *Section 2.7*.

Selecting the specific research method from within the quantitative umbrella is the next step in the research procedure. This choice depends on the research question, but also on resources (e.g. time and money) and the desired validity (Theodoulou, 1999a). Burnham et al. (2008) discern five different types of research design: the experimental design, the cross-sectional design, the longitudinal design, the case study design and the comparative design. We prefer to construct a combined design which consists of a cross-sectional basis and a comparative complement. Such a method is referred to as methodological *triangulation* and has the main advantage that it “*may provide complementary data which can strengthen the findings*” (Burnham et al., 2008: 40).

The basis of our design is cross-sectional. In a cross-sectional design, information is gathered amongst a large number of cases at a particular moment in time (Burnham et al., 2008). Subsequent analyses then look for associations and relations between the variables in the data-set. Due to the vast amount of data collected, the design is often used in quantitative analysis. As a result, it is also one of the most popular research designs in social sciences, particularly in those cases where experiments are not feasible (such as our research setting) and/or conclusions should go beyond the specific context of one case study. Burnham et al. (2008) mention its restricted scope in terms of time, and thus applicability, to be the main disadvantage of the cross-sectional design. Scholars who wish to scrutinize evolution over time, for instance, often use a longitudinal design. Since we foremost want to collect a large amount of data on the contemporary population of Belgian local councillors concerning several thematic subjects, the cross-sectional design still seems the most appropriate way to proceed. Accordingly, this design structures the first three research themes of the analysis, providing information on (a) recruitment and career, (b) councillors’ role orientation, and (c) political representation (*Chapters 3 to 5*).

In addition to the cross-sectional basis of research, we have selected an international comparative design to structure the final thematic analysis (*Chapter 6*). As Bara (2009: 45) notes, “*the process of comparing lies at the very heart of analysis.*” Through the careful selection of cases a comparative design might provide an academic surplus in four ways (Burnham, 2008; Landman, 2008). First, it promotes contextual description. In our case, this implies that the international comparative study may give us a deeper understanding of the Belgian findings by framing them in a broader perspective. This approach should enhance the validity and objectivity of our results (Bara, 2009; Hopkin, 2010).

Second, a comparative design helps to classify the political world. Classification as such, however, is not a primary earmark of our study. Rather, it is subsidiary to the third function of the comparative design: hypothesis-testing. As noted above, our study will test three general and common hypotheses on comparative local government systems (Goldsmith & Page, 2010). The hypotheses hold that local systems (a) further drift apart (*divergence*), (b) reflect a path-dependent legacy (*path-dependency*), or (c) move in the same direction (*convergence*). Obviously, we apply these hypotheses to the role and position of the local councillors within these local systems. We have found this the most feasible method to tackle the basic hypothesis that, in terms of councillors’ role and position, local governments in Flanders and Wallonia are heading in different directions (i.e. by following the path of their neighbours the Netherlands and France, see De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; see also *Section 2.3.1*). Indeed, our cross-sectional design does not allow for longitudinal analysis, nor do we dispose of comparable data on local councillors from previous studies. Hence the comparative approach, including the purposive selection of the Netherlands and France as theoretical reference cases, enables us to test the basic comparative research hypotheses. Since the Netherlands and France are theoretically opposed (i.e. *most different* from each other) whilst both have some characteristics in common with the (formal) Belgian model (i.e. *most similar* to Belgium), we refer to our comparative design as a most similar/most different design (see Landman, 2008)¹⁴.

Finally, the fourth function of the comparative method is prediction. Based on the comparison of different countries, the scholar might predict outcomes in other countries, or future developments in the specific country under study. Particularly the latter perspective is important for us. In fact, the information on the French and Dutch councillors might help us to interpret and discuss the results from the Belgian case, while introducing some (possible) future perspectives in the general conclusion (*Chapter 7*).

¹⁴ Hopkin (2010) argues that large-N studies at the individual level (such as ours) are particularly suited for such designs.

2.4. MEASUREMENT

The next step in the methodological process is to establish the measurement of research, i.e. “*the assignment of numerals or numbers to objects, events, or variables according to rules*” (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996: 156). This step thus determines how characteristics of certain objects will be ascertained (Brinkman, 2000). As a logical extension of the operationalization of our research plan, the measurement is specified per theme in each study. The general measurement of the variables has been set in the standard questionnaire of the *MAELG* project. It varies from the nominal level (e.g. gender, profession, party affiliation) and the ordinal level (e.g. degree of support for certain reforms in/of local democracy) to the ratio level (e.g. experience, inhabitants of the municipality, age). For analytical (or sometimes theoretical) purposes, however, we may also transpose these data to a lower level of measurement in the study (e.g. rescaling a continuous variable in a number of categories, grouping certain items by factor analysis).

The central criteria for the quality of measurement are reliability and validity (Kleinnijenhuis, 1999; Burnham et al., 2008). In short, reliability means that repeated measurements of the same variable produce consistent results (Kleinnijenhuis, 1999). Validity, on the other hand, implies that the measurement actually measures what the researcher intends to measure (Brinkman, 2000)¹⁵. In each chapter, we pay attention to the specific operationalization(s) and subsequent measurement and treatment of the variables, as well as to the statistical techniques applied in order to maximize the reliability and validity of our research.

2.5. DATA COLLECTION

Once the research design has been developed and the measurement has been set, the research data can be collected. In this section, we discuss the specific procedure which we have used to collect our data (i.e. the mail survey, the sampling procedure and the survey procedure), as well as the outcome of this process (i.e. the response and representativeness of the survey).

¹⁵ For instance, a recurring pitfall for our study is the analysis of councillors’ *behaviour*. Since we do not measure their actual behaviour, but only a personal (hence, indirect) opinion of the latter, we must be careful when interpreting these data (i.e. as self-reported behaviour).

2.5.1. Mail survey

We opted to use the standard *MAELG* mail survey as the instrument to collect our research data. In political science, surveys are frequently used for quantitative large-N research on the individual level (John, 2010). Kleinnijenhuis (1999: 79) defines a survey as “a standard list of questions that will be posed to a great number of individuals.” Instead of directly observing political behaviour, the survey asks for the respondents’ self-identification in terms of attitudes and behaviour (Theodoulou, 1999a). It thus measures the political world in an indirect way.

Sending out the survey per mail has some important advantages which made this method the most appropriate one to collect the vast amount of data needed for our research in a standardized way (see Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Billiet & Carton, 2006). First, mail surveys render the process of data collection relatively cheap and time-saving because they do not require the employment of a large staff of interviewers. Second, this method reduces biasing errors that might occur during the personal contact and interaction between interviewer and interviewee. Accordingly, the mail survey also augments the standardization of research. Third, mail surveys give the respondents a stronger feeling of anonymity. This might be particularly important with regard to personal or sensitive questions (e.g. age, gender, party affiliation, ideological affiliation). Fourth, mail surveys allow for more flexibility and consultation by the respondent. Indeed, he/she is free to complete the questionnaire at the best possible moment and, if necessary, he/she can consult certain information or relevant sources. Finally, mail surveys increase the accessibility of the research population. Sending out questionnaires by mail is therefore a feasible option to reach an extensive or geographically dispersed population such as the population of local councillors in Belgium.

On the other hand, mail surveys have some disadvantages or limitations that we should keep in mind as well (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Billiet & Carton, 2006)¹⁶. The first set relates to the lack of flexibility. Indeed, mail surveys (can) only include simple and straightforward questions. Interviews, as opposite instruments of data collection, allow (a) probing for further clarifications and complete/adequate answers, (b) altering the order of the questions, (c) asking specific knowledge questions or complex tasks and (d) register non-verbal behaviour and spontaneous reactions. The second disadvantage is that mail surveys provide no control over the response process and setting. They provide no information on the time and duration of response either. Finally, the third and most important disadvantage of mail surveys concerns the low response rate, defined as “the percentage of respondents in the sample who return completed

¹⁶ The advantages of the personal survey or interview are typically considered as the disadvantages of the mail survey, and vice versa (Billiet & Carton, 2006).

questionnaires” (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996: 226). According to the authors, the typical response rate of mail surveys is situated between 20 and 40% only, whereas this percentage substantially augments in personal interviews. The danger of such a large non-response is that the group of non-respondents significantly differs from the group of respondents. Therefore, careful attention should be paid to maximizing the response rate of the survey and testing the representativeness of the research sample and response (see following sections).

The actual questionnaire for our research was drawn up by the joint team of researchers from the Euroloc group in the context of the international comparative *MAELG* project. As indicated before (see *Section 2.2*), each national team of academics was asked to retain as many original questions of the base version as possible. The questionnaire consists of 5 thematic components: (a) questions about the council and actors in local democracy, (b) questions about the role as a councillor, (c) questions about the view on local democracy and local policy, (d) questions about the political career and party and (e) questions about the (personal) background. Most questions are closed (or closed-ended) questions, often presented in a response matrix. The main advantage of such questions is that they advance the reliability and comparability of the data. On the downside, these questions *force* respondents to choose a particular answer which might not always perfectly fit with their specific opinion or situation (Brinkman, 2000). Therefore further clarifications or specifications are sometimes foreseen in the form of an open-ended question or category whilst a couple of Likert-scales are used as well. The questionnaire (written in *generic* English) is added in Appendix A. For our study, we translated this version into Dutch and French – omitting some questions or variables which were not relevant for our context¹⁷. Each respondent was surveyed in his mother tongue.

2.5.2. Sampling procedure

In 2008, the total population of Belgian local councillors consisted of 13.281 individual cases¹⁸. Since practical concerns (time, money, manpower, the numerosity of the councillor population) inhibited us from surveying this entire population, we had to select a sampling procedure which guaranteed a representative image of the latter. Ideally, a sample is “*a group that accurately reflects the makeup of the population*” (Theodoulou, 1999a: 146).

¹⁷ This concerns question 4 (not relevant since there are always agreements on policies and distributions of posts in coalition governments in Belgian local government), question 12 (councillors always receive a remuneration per council meeting), question 32 (we know that the weight of personal votes has been increased in the Belgian legislation) and variable 164, 171 and 204 (contextualized).

¹⁸ The district councillors from Antwerp are not included in the research population and survey sample.

We selected our research units by means of a *stratified random sample*. The technique of random sampling ensures that, independently from each other, every unit of the research population has the same chance to be included in the sample (Burnham et al., 2008). The main advantage of random sampling is that it tends to generate a representative sample that enables the researcher to extrapolate his/her conclusions to the population as a whole (Theodoulou, 1999a). A *stratified* random sample is constructed when the researcher expects that the results of the analyses might fundamentally differ between certain subgroups of the population (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). He/she therefore divides the population into a number of subgroups or strata on the basis of these characteristic parameters (Kleinnijenhuis, 1999; Burnham et al., 2008). Each stratum should be internally as homogenous as possible whilst the difference between the strata should be maximized. Obviously, the criteria or parameters for the stratification should relate to the topic of interest and should not create too many subgroups either (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). Finally, once the strata have been composed, the researcher draws a simple random sample from each stratum. Together the selected cases comprise the final sample (Theodoulou, 1999a).

Practical considerations (i.e. the absence of a detailed list of Belgian local councillors with their personal characteristics whereupon our stratification could be based) did not allow us to draw a stratified sample from the population of Belgian local councillors directly. Therefore, we sought to create a representative sample indirectly, by stratifying on the municipal level. Unlike individual councillor characteristics, these municipal parameters were and are available and freely accessible. As such, we stratified the 589 Belgian municipalities on the basis of three parameters that might (possibly) influence the role and position of their local councillors.

The first parameter is municipal ‘size’¹⁹. Size not only figures frequently as a theoretical determinant in political analysis (Reynaert, 2000), it is expected to impact on the acclaimed strain on local councillors as well – indeed, some authors assume that the latter is more tangible in large(r) cities (Gabriel et al., 2000; Haus et al., 2005; see *Chapter 6*). We divided the Belgian municipalities into two groups: a group of municipalities that count more than 10.000 inhabitants (N=342 or 58%) and a group of municipalities that count 10.000 inhabitants or less (N=247 or 42%). This threshold had been set by the international *MAELG* project in order to maximize the comparability of research. For our study however, omitting councillors from municipalities with less than 10.000 inhabitants

¹⁹ The division is based on the official population numbers for 1 January 2007, consulted on the website of Belgian federal government (<http://www.statbel.fgov.be/downloads/pop200701com.xls>).

would fundamentally have narrowed the research scope and reduced the generalizability of the research findings²⁰.

The second parameter of the sampling procedure is the ‘region’ in which the municipality is located. In the general introduction (*Chapter 1*), we have outlined how the Belgian regions Flanders (308 municipalities), Wallonia (262 municipalities) and Brussels Capital (19 municipalities) differ in some cultural and structural traits regarding their local systems. The regionalization of the constitutive framework on local government from 2002 onwards has formalized and further triggered this evolution. Including councillors from the three Belgian regions was thus an absolute necessity in our research. Accordingly, the two initial groups that had been created by the parameter size were further divided in subgroups according to the parameter region.

Regarding the third and final parameter, we sought to classify the municipalities on the base of their ‘socio-economic profile’. Again, this could help to create a representative sample of the Belgian municipal landscape whilst we might also expect that the socio-economic character of the municipality (partly) determines the functioning of its local councillors²¹. To classify the municipalities, we have used a typology developed by the Dexia bank²². Dexia is an official partner of Belgian government, particularly in terms of local statistics. Furthermore, it was the only available typology that classified the three Belgian regions in a uniform way. The typology includes 7 broad categories and several subcategories (see Box 2.1). Accordingly, the groups that had been created by the parameters size and region were further divided on the basis of the 7 broad categories of the typology. Finally, in order to obtain a balanced number of strata which each include approximately 10 municipalities on average, the groups were divided for a final time on the basis of the subcategories of the typology, and, if necessary, ascending municipal size.

²⁰ For instance, the average municipal size and the proportion of municipalities with more than 10.000 inhabitants differed strongly between the 3 Belgian regions in 2007: Flanders (average size 19.861, 71.1% above 10.000), Wallonia (average size 13.114, 39.7% above 10.000) and Brussels Capital (average size 54.274, 100% above 10.000).

²¹ For instance in a small rural village, the recruitment process or bond between the representatives and the represented might be different than that found in a strongly urbanized central city.

²² DEXIA, Lokale Financiën. Sociaaleconomische typologie van de gemeenten (<http://www.dexia.be/NL/Professional/PublicFinance/oursector/Publications/SpecialStudy>). The current name of Dexia bank in Belgium is Belfius Bank.

Box 2.1. The socio-economic profile of Belgian municipalities: Dexia typology

(1) *Residential municipalities (N=170):*

residential municipalities in rural zones, residential municipalities on the outskirts of the town (or border zones), conurbations with tertiary activity, residential suburbs with high incomes, residential municipalities in southeast and northwest Brussels.

(2) *Rural municipalities or urbanized rural municipalities (N=165):*

little agrarian municipalities, very rural municipalities with strong ageing, rural municipalities or urbanized rural municipalities with strong demographic growth, predominantly agrarian rural municipalities with weak touristic activity, predominantly wooded rural municipalities with weak touristic activity.

(3) *Municipalities with a concentration of economic activity (N=79):*

rural and agrarian municipalities with industrial activity, urbanized rural municipalities with industrial activity and demographic growth, cities and conurbations with industrial activity, municipalities with economic activity in rural or semi-urban zones, municipalities with economic activity in urbanized or conurbation zones.

(4) *Semi-urban municipalities or conurbations (N=67):*

little urbanized municipalities with demographic decline, strongly urbanized municipalities with low incomes, weakly urbanized municipalities, suburban cores or conurbations.

(5) *Central municipalities (N=91):*

medium-sized cities, regional cities, large cities and regional cities, central municipalities and touristic centres, small cities, central cities in rural environment, medium-sized cities with high incomes.

(6) *Touristic municipalities (N=8):*

coastal municipalities.

(7) *Strongly urbanized central municipalities (N=9):*

municipalities from the first belt, large municipalities from the canal zone, employment centre.

The end result of this process was the identification of a group of 59 strata each comprising 8, 9, 10 or 11 municipalities. An exception was made to ensure that the large cities of the three regions were adequately represented in the sample²³. Every stratum was internally homogenous regarding the size, region and socio-economic character of its municipalities. The difference between the strata on the other hand was maximal.

²³ The largest cities of the three regions (Schaarbeek, Anderlecht, Brussels; Antwerp, Ghent; Namur, Liège and Charleroi) counted far more inhabitants than the other municipalities of their original stratum. Since it was important to ensure that at least one large city of each region was included in the sample, these cities have been placed exceptionally in separate (sub)strata.

Depending on the size of the stratum, 2 or 3 municipalities per stratum were subsequently selected at random by the statistical computer program SPSS. The sampling procedure thus aimed at being proportionate, selecting the same number of units from every stratum (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Theodoulou, 1999a).

In the end, this procedure resulted in a final sample of 180 municipalities (see Appendix B). Together these 180 municipalities comprise 4.096 local councillors or 30.8% of the total population of Belgian local councillors²⁴. To verify whether our final sample adequately represents the total landscape of Belgian municipalities in terms of size, region and socio-economic profile, we ran a Chi-square (χ^2) test with SPSS²⁵. The test confirmed that our sample is perfectly representative for the total landscape of Belgian municipalities in terms of size ($\chi^2=.005$, $df=1$, $sig=.942$), region ($\chi^2=.212$, $df=2$, $sig=.900$) and socio-economic profile ($\chi^2=.208$, $df=6$, $sig=1.000$).

2.5.3. Survey procedure

The review of the mail survey above (Section 2.5.1) has singled out a low response rate as the main problem associated with this type of research. Dillman (1978) therefore developed a specific method, called the *Total Design Method* (TDM), which seeks to minimize non-response for mail surveys (Hodding & Bass, 1986; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Billiet & Carton, 2008). In 2000, Dillman slightly modified this method into the *Tailored Design Method* (TDM, Dillman, 2000). The latter replaced the old universal method with a new tailored one that considers contextual elements of research such as specific sponsorship, the research population and the content of the survey. Essentially, Dillman's method combines an attractive layout with a thorough follow-up of response. It rests on the theory of social exchange. This theory states that social action is determined by its expected and anticipated advantages. The researcher

²⁴ The sample comprises of 75 municipalities below 10.000 and 105 municipalities above 10.000; it comprises of 6 municipalities from the Brussels Region, 97 municipalities from Flanders and 77 municipalities from Wallonia; finally, it comprises of 51 municipalities from the socio-economic category 1, 52 municipalities from category 2, 24 municipalities from category 3, 21 municipalities from category 4, 27 municipalities from category 5, 2 municipalities from category 6 and 3 municipalities from category 6 (see Box 2.1 for the categories).

²⁵ This test indicates the significance of the difference between *observed* frequencies (*in casu* the frequency distributions of our parameters size, region and socio-economic profile in our research sample) and *expected* frequencies (*in casu* the frequency distributions that our parameters size, region and socio-economic profile would have in the sample if they would be perfectly representative for the population of Belgian municipalities at large). For our sample to be representative, there should thus be *no* significant difference between the observed and the expected frequencies, i.e. between the actual sample and the theoretical sample (as a representative map of the total population). We use the common significance level .05 as critical value (John, 2010).

should thus increase the expected benefices for the respondents whilst minimizing the expected costs and establishing a relation of trust (Dillman, 2000).

The first element of our survey procedure is the composure of a respondent-friendly questionnaire. The original questions had been phrased by the Euroloc research group in the context of the *MAELG* project (see Appendix A). Regarding the layout of the survey, we organized and printed the questionnaire in the form of a booklet, the preferred format by Dillman. This booklet counted 19 pages in total, which is quite lengthy. However given the overarching international setting of research, it was impossible to substantially reduce the size of the questionnaire. The front page of our questionnaire included the title of the survey, the logos of the participating universities (i.e. Ghent University and University College Ghent) and the names of the promoters of the study. At the end of the questionnaire, we provided space for additional comments by the respondent. The back page included a word of thanks and contact details.

In addition to a respondent-friendly questionnaire, the survey implementation is at least equally important to increase response. Even though there is no single magic formula to carry out the survey in the most successful way, Dillman (2000) has determined four (complementary) conditions that often significantly augment response: (a) four contacts with the respondent, (b) including return envelopes in the survey package, (c) personalizing the correspondence with the respondents and (d) token financial incentives. In our study we did not foresee financial incentives on deontological grounds, and because we wanted to guarantee the objective and scientific character of the study. Besides, such incentives would have significantly augmented the research expenses. As for the rest, we have aimed at complying with Dillman's conditions as much as possible.

Our first contact with the respondents was the original questionnaire mailed on 6 June 2008²⁶. It included a cover letter, the questionnaire and a return envelope. The cover letter counted one page. It mentioned the date, a salutation of the respondent, the goal of the survey, the importance of the respondent's participation (*in casu* stressing the value for Belgian research and the European research program), a guarantee of anonymity and confidential treatment of the data, an enclosed return envelope, a signature in ink from the project leader and contact details. The return envelope counted a DA-postal code which replaced the traditional stamp. On the back of the envelop, a number was added in order to monitor response whilst at the end of the questionnaire, we asked for the postal

²⁶ Dillman suggests that the researcher might send a brief pre-notice letter to the respondents prior to this contact. Such letter attends the respondents on the upcoming survey, meanwhile encouraging response. This has not been done in our survey, mainly due to the time pressure. Indeed, we aimed at organizing the original first survey (i.e. mailing plus time for response) before July – which marks the start of the summer holidays for most municipal councils. Postponing the entire process to September would have made it problematic to deliver the Belgian data in time for the Euroloc research group.

code of the respondents' municipality as well (for the same reason). The total package was sent to all the local councillors, aldermen and the mayors of the 180 municipalities included in the sample to their official address at the city hall. Respondents were asked to return the completed questionnaire by 30 June 2008.

The ensuing contact that Dillman suggests is a Thank You/Reminder postcard which refreshes the memory of the respondents, usually one week after the original mail-out. We did not directly address the councillors again, but contacted the municipal secretary (CEO) by e-mail. The main reason for this procedure was practical: many councillors do not pass by the city hall on a weekly base, whereas the CEO is quite easy to contact. Furthermore, the municipal CEO is often a neutral and influential person in the municipality. His/her co-operation and moral authority might therefore encourage councillors to respond.

The third contact was to re-send the survey integrally on 6 August 2008. This contact intended to further urge the participants to respond. As Dillman notes, the tone of the cover letter of this contact is usually more insistent, stressing the importance of the study even more. In our case, we did not only send these questionnaires to the non-respondents but also to the other councillors who had already returned a completed questionnaire. The reason for this was twofold. On one hand, it was a possibility to thank the respondents personally for their co-operation in the survey. On the other hand, it was an attempt to further stress the anonymity of the research²⁷. Indeed in the first round, we received some complaints from councillors about the personal information asked (since the combination of the postal code with personal information such as political party, gender and age could lead us to identify the respondent). Therefore, the cover letter also stressed the confidentiality of the research again. Due to practical considerations, the method was also slightly different in the second round of surveying. Since most municipal councils have a summer holiday in July-August, we decided to contact the councillors at their private addresses. When it was available, we sent the questionnaire to the e-mail addresses of the councillors. The latter were often available on the municipal websites and this is obviously a cheaper method as well. Furthermore, the questionnaire could be completed electronically, so the efforts for the respondents were reduced²⁸. The deadline for this second survey round was set on 1 September 2008. For the group of respondents who did not have a public e-mail address (or from whom we were not able to retrieve the address),

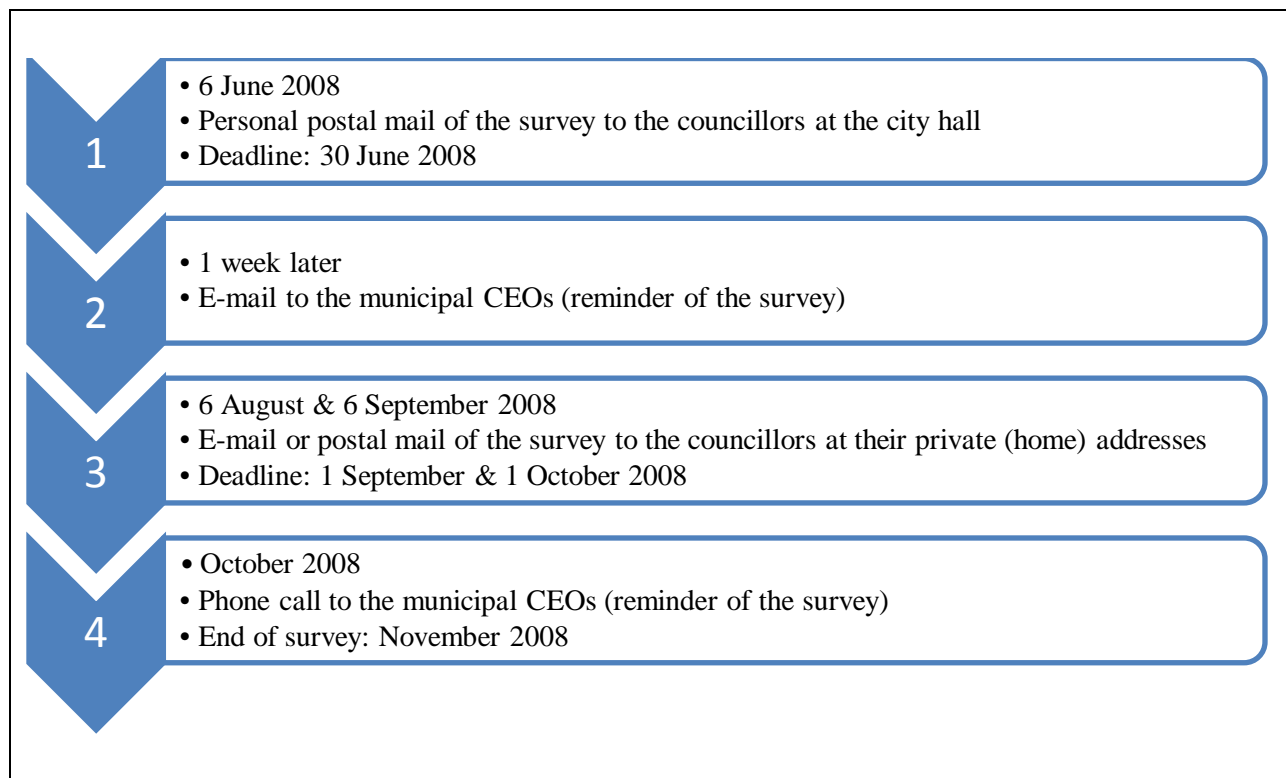
²⁷ Obviously, we stressed the fact that councillors who had already returned a completed questionnaire in the first round did not need to do this again. With the help of the ID on the return envelope, we could ensure that no responses were included twice in the data-set.

²⁸ In this sense, the contact also fits with the fifth contact proposed by Dillman, i.e. invoking special procedures.

we sent out the survey package by mail to their private addresses²⁹. This was done on 6 September 2008 with a return date set on 1 October 2008.

Finally, we organized a fourth contact round in October 2008. This round consisted of a personal rappel by e-mail (when possible), and a phone call to the municipal CEO of those municipalities with a very low response rate up to that point to ask them to encourage councillors to participate in the survey. We closed the survey procedure during November 2008. Figure 2.3 summarizes the different steps of this process.

Figure 2.3. The survey procedure



²⁹ When the e-mail addresses or home addresses were not freely accessible, we contacted the municipalities in order to receive a list of councillors' contact details.

2.5.4. Response

The survey procedure outlined above resulted in a total response of 856 single units or cases. Compared to the initial research population of 4096 units, this equals a response rate of 20.9%³⁰. Considering the total amount of time and effort invested, this result was fairly disappointing. It seems that several factors might account for the reluctance of local councillors to participate in our survey. They basically stem from a form of inaccessibility or a plain refusal to co-operate (Brinkman, 2000).

First, low response rates remain a typical drawback of mail surveys generally (Brinkman, 2000; Burnham et al., 2008). Accordingly, there is no fixed standard for the minimal response rate needed in survey research (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). Brinkman (2000) hereby indicates that despite efforts to maximize response, researchers might be content if they obtain a response rate of 25 to 40% by using mail surveys.

Second, some practical obstacles prevented us from applying the complete *Total/Tailored Design Method* developed by Dillman. For instance, deadlines set by the *MAELG* project made it difficult to postpone the survey to the period after the summer holidays, or send a pre-notice letter to the councillors. The absence of detailed contact lists in some municipalities (particularly in the smaller municipalities in Wallonia) made it almost impossible to directly contact some respondents in the second or third contact round as well. Besides, the questionnaire in itself was quite difficult and lengthy (see also Egner et al., *forthcoming*) and contained sensitive personal information (e.g. age, party affiliation, vision on local democracy, etc). Further, given the large number of municipalities included in the sample, it was not possible to personally attend a council meeting in which the survey could be explained and completed. Handing out (and elucidating) the questionnaire on site is seen as a fruitful approach to enhance response (Brinkman, 2000)³¹.

A final set of possible explanations relates to our research population in particular. Many scholars note that the latter's personal involvement with the research subject is key to achieve a high response rate (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Brinkman, 2000; Dillman, 2000). In this respect, a certain *response fatigue* could occur amongst the population (Brinkman, 2000). Belgian politicians, for instance, tend to be surveyed quite frequently on a wide variety of topics. Besides, some councillors indicated that they did not wish to participate because they were/are strongly disillusioned with the way in which local democracy works in their municipality, or because their party prohibited

³⁰ After the first survey round, this percentage was 10.9% (N=446). Councillors who returned an empty questionnaire, as well as double responses, are not included in this total.

³¹ For instance, we applied this method in a (smaller but similar) survey amongst the provincial councillors in Flanders (see Olislagers et al., 2011). It indeed resulted in considerably higher response rates, varying from 51,2% to 88,1% per province.

them from doing so. And obviously, the fact that many councillors fulfil their mandate in addition to a fulltime occupation makes such research an intensive endeavour.

Bearing the above in mind, our response rate is thus not an exception for mail survey research in political science. Moreover, if we compare our result with the figures of the other partners in the *MAELG* project (see Table 2.1; figures refer only to the response of the councillors from municipalities with more than 10.000 inhabitants), the Belgian response rate does not appear to be out of order regarding the *European peloton*. Only in Sweden were the researchers able to collect completed questionnaires from a majority of the research population. This could suggest a limited interest and/or involvement of local councillors in our research topic *in se*³².

Table 2.1. Response rates of the *MAELG* project

Country	Response rate (%)	N
Sweden	63.1	1.346
The Netherlands	38.6	1.222
Switzerland	37.7	1.616
Norway	37.1	1.134
Spain	25.9	520
Italy	23.8	1.201
Israel	23.5	147
Belgium	22.4	634
Germany	22.0	894
Greece	21.2	235
Austria	19.9	408
Poland	15.6	328
Czech Republic	12.6	624
France	12.1	720
United Kingdom	11.5	700
Croatia	10.3	233
General	23.1	11.962

(Egner et al., forthcoming)

A final remark concerns our obtained dataset of 856 individual cases. Burnham et al. (2008) indicate that 300 cases is a frequently used minimal sample size in statistical theory. Hence, our total sample of 856 cases has allowed us to run all the statistical tests required. Besides, if we consider the total local councillor population in Belgium

³² This was also put forward by Kerrouche (2005) in his analysis of the response of French mayors in the European Polleader-project.

(N=13.281), our dataset represents a fairly large sample fraction of 1:16. Such a large fraction is a typical advantage of mail surveys. Indeed, even though the response rate of mail surveys might be lower than in other types of research, the original accessibility of the research population was significantly larger to start with (Billiet & Carton, 2006).

2.5.5. Representativeness

The main problem with high non-response is that the group of non-respondents might significantly differ from the group of respondents (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Brinkman, 2000). This obviously hinders the generalization of the research findings. Therefore, it is important to analyze the representativeness of the response too. Since non-response ultimately remains under the radar of empirical research, scholars should look for certain estimates to determine the representativeness of the dataset (Brinkman, 2000). As Billiet and Carton (2006) state, a practical way of doing this is to compare response with non-response. This method is only feasible if particular information on the characteristics of the total research population was available at the start of the sampling procedure, for instance in the case of stratified samples like ours³³.

To analyze the representativeness of our response, we first ran a Chi-square (χ^2) test with SPSS again. This test verified whether our final dataset (N=856) represents the initial stratified research sample (N=4.096) in terms of the stratification parameters size, region and socio-economic profile³⁴. The analysis shows that our dataset is not perfectly representative in terms of municipal 'size' ($\chi^2=7.270$, $df=1$, $sig=.007$). There are more respondents from the larger municipalities in our dataset than in the original stratified research sample. A similar over-representation emerges regarding the second parameter 'region' ($\chi^2=30.861$, $df=2$, $sig=.000$). Here, councillors from Flanders are over-represented in the dataset. On the other hand, the response has turned out to be perfectly

³³ Other methods (see Billiet & Carton, 2006) of testing the representativeness of response (e.g. comparing data to the original population at large, addressing non-respondents and looking for bias, analyzing the response characteristics from the different survey rounds) were not feasible in our context (e.g. no data on the total Belgian councillor population were available; deontological reasons prohibited addressing non-respondents; the different moments of response overlapped in practice due to the summer holidays in between).

³⁴ The data file comprises of 222 cases from municipalities below 10.000 and 621 cases from municipalities above 10.000; it comprises of 33 cases from municipalities in the Brussels Region, 565 cases from municipalities in Flanders and 252 cases from municipalities in Wallonia; finally, it comprises of 221 cases from municipalities in the socio-economic category 1, 211 cases from municipalities in category 2, 121 cases from municipalities in category 3, 98 cases from municipalities in category 4, 160 cases from municipalities in category 5, 12 cases from municipalities in category 6 and 20 cases from municipalities in category 6 (see Box 2.1 for the categories). In some cases we could not identify the size, region and/or socio-economic profile of the responses because all the references to the respondent's identity (e.g. postal code, response code on the return envelope, etc) had been removed.

representative in terms of the ‘socio-economic profile’ of the municipalities ($\chi^2=4.153$, $df=6$, $sig=.656$).

To further analyze the skewed response in terms of region and size, another statistical parameter is at our disposal. In fact, the Chi-square tests indicate whether the response is representative for the research sample or not, but they do not tell us how substantial the eventual bias in response is. Comparing the non-response with the response on the parameters size and region by means of a Cramer’s V test is a possible way of assessing the strength of the over-representation of councillors from the larger municipalities and the Flemish municipalities³⁵. The value of Cramer’s V varies from 0 (no association between the variables) to 1 (perfect association between the variables) (see Box 2.2 below).

Box 2.2. Interpretation of the strength of relationship coefficients

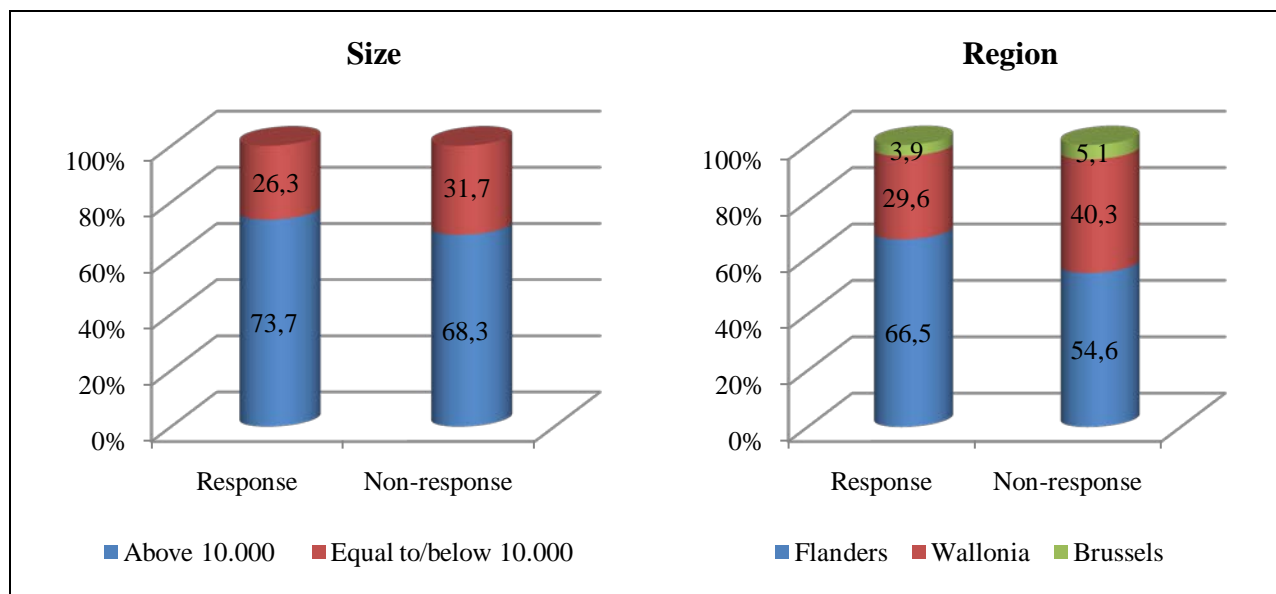
Coefficients	Description
0.00	No (linear) association
0.01 – 0.09	Trivial (linear) relationship
0.10 – 0.29	Low to moderate (linear) relationship
0.30 – 0.49	Moderate to substantial (linear) relationship
0.50 – 0.69	Substantial to very strong (linear) relationship
0.70 – 0.89	Very strong (linear) relationship
0.90 +	Near perfect

(De Vaus, 2002: 259)

³⁵ Cramer’s V is frequently used to test the association between two nominal variables in large(r) tables, and to indicate the strength of the association between these variables (den Boer et al., 1994; Kleinnijenhuis, 1999). In our case, we analyze the association between the variables ‘size’ (i.e. above 10.000 or equal/below 10.000) or ‘region’ (i.e. Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) on the one hand and the variable ‘response’ (i.e. response versus non-response) on the other.

Figure 2.4 presents a graphic picture of the skewed response in our data file. The first graph of the figure demonstrates that councillors from the larger municipalities are slightly over-represented in the data file: they make up 73.7% of the respondents while they comprise 68.3% of the non-respondents. The Cramer's V value for this association is .047 ($p=.002$). Accordingly, there is a significant association between size and response, even though the strength of this association is just trivial. The second graph in Figure 2.4 shows a stronger skewed response in terms of region. Flemish councillors are over-represented in our dataset: they make up 66.5% of the respondents while their group represents just 54.6% of the non-respondents. The graph further shows that particularly councillors from Wallonia have participated less in our survey. The Cramer's V value for this association is .098 ($p=.000$). This means that the association is highly significant, but still rather low (see Box 2.2). This is why we will not weigh the different categories for the analyses further on³⁶. However, we should keep this bias in check when discussing and interpreting the results for the *general* population.

Figure 2.4. Representativeness of response in terms of size and region



³⁶ An exception will be made for the comparative analysis in *Chapter 6*, where we will weigh the dataset to include an equal share of Flemish, Walloon, French and Dutch councillors.

2.6. DATA ANALYSIS

The data from the questionnaires were inputted to a standard SPSS computer file created by the German team of the *MAELG* project. All data analyses have been carried out on a quantitative base by the statistical software program SPSS (George & Mallery, 2010). Landman (2008: 20) notes that “*quantitative methods are based on the distributions these data exhibit and the relationships that can be established between numeric variables using simple and advanced statistical methods.*”

A combination of these approaches underpins the thematic analyses of the cross-sectional studies in our study (*Chapter 3 to 5*). The first step is always descriptive. Descriptive analyses of the data provide valuable information on the research matter (Burnham et al., 2008; John, 2010). This is usually done by unravelling the observations and looking for proportions which reduce and simplify the information (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; John, 2010). In our research, we prefer to present the frequency distributions of the variables under study, i.e. a list of the observations in each category of the variable, as well as their mean value and standard deviation to indicate the dispersion of the results³⁷. These frequency distributions, mean values and standard variations are presented in tabular form. The tables thus reflect the univariate analyses, scrutinizing one variable at a time. A complementary way of presenting descriptive statistics is to use graphs such as pies, bar charts, etc. John (2010) argues that these graphical presentations are (too) often neglected in political research, despite the rich results and insights that they can provide. Given the format of our studies (i.e. as academic papers), we often lacked space to include such graphs initially. For the final book version, however, we have added relevant descriptive graphics, as well as additional analyses to complement the transversal story of the study, as appendices to the chapters.

A second surplus of descriptive analyses is that they may lay the basis for more sophisticated explanatory complements (Burnham et al., 2008). The latter form the subsequent step in our cross-sectional study. Indeed, the specific operationalizations of our fundamental research question entail a number of specific hypotheses to be tested. In most cases, these hypotheses relate to the impact of several (groups or levels of) variables on the concept under study. Indeed, “*the social and political worlds are multi-causal, which makes it hard to identify one specific relationship*” (John, 2010: 275). These explanatory analyses are thus multivariate (Theodoulou, 1999b). Accordingly, we apply the technique of multiple regression analysis to test our hypotheses on the explanatory level. This technique allows us to verify the impact of the independent variables, both collectively and individually, on the dependent variable under study (John, 2010). The confidence or significance level used to interpret the relation between the variables is

³⁷ Often, we only present the frequency distribution of the most relevant categories.

generally set on the most common level of .05 (i.e. a 95 per cent confidence interval; John, 2010)³⁸. Yet in the analyses that include many variables (e.g. *Chapter 3 and 5*), we further distinguish between the 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 confidence interval to gain finer insights in the complex relation between these numerous variables.

Finally in the comparative study (*Chapter 6*), we apply a slightly different analytical approach. In order to test the comparative hypotheses, we present bivariate cross-tables which depict the relation between the variables under study (e.g. councillors' role attitude or recruitment process) and the different countries/regions (i.e. Flanders, Wallonia, the Netherlands and France). Meanwhile, statistical tests are used to scrutinize the strength and significance of these associations and patterns. Also for this chapter, graphical descriptive analyses are added as appendices.

2.7. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter has set forth the overall research methodology of our study. The latter has been designed to answer the fundamental and applied research questions in the most relevant and feasible way. The research strategy was thus contingent upon both theoretical and practical claims. Yet simultaneously, some of the choices that have been made inevitably limit the scope of our study. In the final section of the methodological chapter, we summarize these limitations.

The first fundamental choice we made concerned the operationalization of the fundamental research question into a more specific and measurable plan. The four components of our broad and multifaceted plan fitted into the theoretical framework and the problem setting developed in the introductory chapter, as well as into the practical research context offered by the *MAELG* project and personal research interests. Yet inevitably, some other perspectives have also remained underexposed or less developed, or other research lines untold. For instance, it could have been interesting to reconstruct the proceedings of the recruitment process as the interplay of different phases via path-analysis, or to sketch the contact patterns and the daily activities of the councillors in detail. It would also have been interesting to dig more deeply into the matter of representation – which is usually worth a full-blown study in itself (e.g. tackling geographical representation, symbolic representation, etc). Or to analyze councillors' perceptions of different democratic models more profoundly. Further, some elements of the comparative chapter (e.g. notions on participatory democracy, the local power

³⁸ This value (i.e. the p-value) indicates the possibility that the relation between 2 or more variables is not random (John, 2010). Accordingly, the significance level indicates whether the results apply to a larger population (Theodoulou, 1999b).

hierarchy) might have deserved a separate analysis. The comparative analysis could also have been elaborated by using more sophisticated statistical techniques (e.g. regression analyses per theme), or by adding more countries from the *MAELG* project.

The other elementary choice was to select an appropriate research procedure. This choice not only comprised the selection of the relevant units of analysis and research method. It entailed a specific method of data collection as well. In sum, our choice was to focus on individual councillors in a quantitative and cross-sectional way via mail survey, while deepening the research findings by means of a comparative complement. Within the methodological limits, this choice should allow us to generalize our empirical results to the population of Belgian local councillors. On the other hand, it has confined our research scope in four possible ways.

First, the selection of councillors as individual units of analysis renders the systematic scrutiny of the role and position of local *councils*, as institutional bodies on the aggregate level, invalid. In fact, the latter is probably subject to specific customs and a particular form of (context-bound) group dynamics, interactions and (power) configurations. The analysis of the latter could yield particular results which may put the discussion on the local system in a different perspective. We could for instance imagine that some councils function quite well due to both the institutionalized and informal mechanisms of power, and the relations between the councillors. In this way, the meso-level can contribute to a democratic and efficient political system on the macro-level. Analyzing the role and position of the council would obviously have required a different research method than the one applied in our study (e.g. orienting the questionnaire towards the council instead of the councillors, applying techniques such as participant observation of council and committee meetings and processes of decision-making, content analysis of the council agenda, interpellations and voting patterns, etc.).

Second, the generalization pursued by the quantitative approach inevitably reduces the depth of the research findings to some extent. Burnham et al. (2008: 166) in this respect indicate that “*quantitative data (...) can never constitute more than a limited aspect of a complex political reality. The particular criticism that is often made of statistics is that, as a form of information, they fail to capture the richness and complexity of the political world.*” We thus have to realize that our choice for comprehensiveness and generalization can never really capture all the complex realities behind the statistical numbers (Bara, 2009; John, 2010), even though the explanatory analyses do search for deeper patterns below the general surface. This means that the general picture painted in our study will probably diverge in practice according to the specific context in/of every municipality. More fine-grained observations and specifications would require qualitative techniques such as in-depth personal interviews with different actors in local democracy, focus groups and/or participant observations (Bara, 2009). These techniques would have

allowed us to further probe into the research matter beyond the fixed response categories included in our standard questionnaire. Still, and particularly given the lack of available data on Belgian local councillors in the first place, we feel that our approach must be taken (and therefore, interpreted) as a necessary basic first step that creates some order and structure in an academic wasteland hitherto.

A third limitation is caused by the research design, consisting of a cross-sectional base and a comparative complement. Even though some diachronic notions can be introduced cautiously per theme (e.g. evaluating professionalization by comparing current data to previous ones), the overall cross-sectional nature of the study confines the time frame to the local councillor population in 2008. Hence, we are not able to verify whether the role and position of local councillors has substantially exacerbated or, on the contrary, ameliorated over time. The cross-sectional design should also lead us to be careful with the explanatory analyses, in which the influence of independent variables upon the dependent variable is examined. John (2010) argues that such explanatory inferences can be made, as long as the independent variables are not related too strongly to each other, and there is a logical ground to assume that one variable precedes the other³⁹.

The last limitation relates to the specific method of data collection and its outcome. John (2010: 270) is quite clear on this subject: “*No perfect set of data exists.*” This is also the case in our research. Some limitations follow from the mail survey method as such (see *Section 2.5.1*). The most important one to keep in mind is probably the fact that our data represent personal opinions of the councillors, and not objective observations. Accordingly, the data may be liable to traditional bias such as guided questions, social desirable answering and carryover effects (i.e. adjusting answers on one question to the answers on previous questions) (Billiet, 2006). Our auto-evaluations, however, are the most practicable way to collect the (wide variety) of information required. Besides, several authors stress the value of actor-centred attitudinal research in political science (Denters & Klok, 2003; Baldersheim & Wollmann, 2006), as well as the congruence of its results (e.g. measuring the perceived influence of certain actors) with more objective analytical counterparts (Denters, 2006; Jacobsen, 2009). A final limitation was obviously the low response rate of the survey procedure (even though it has still resulted in a total dataset of 856 cases), and the slight overrepresentation of Flemish councillors and councillors from larger municipalities in the final dataset. This should be reckoned with when results from the general population are interpreted.

Keeping these limitations in mind, we will now proceed with the empirical analysis of the role and position of the local councillors in Belgium. *Chapter 3* addresses the recruitment

³⁹ Each multivariate regression analysis has been tested to ascertain that there was no multicollinearity between the independent variables. The logical order of the variables in the analyses is discussed and hypothesized in each chapter.

process and the subsequent political career of the councillors, paying particular attention to the degree of professionalization in both. *Chapter 4* tackles the basic councillor role-set, which consists of representation, policy and control. *Chapter 5* is concerned with political representation from a substantive point of view whilst *Chapter 6* frames the role and position of the Belgian local councillors in a wider, international comparative context.

CHAPTER 3

NECESSARY ASYMMETRY OR UNDEMOCRATIC IMBALANCE?

PROFESSIONALIZATION IN THE RECRUITMENT AND CAREER OF BELGIAN LOCAL COUNCILLORS¹

Abstract

Like national politicians, local representatives are claimed to become increasingly professionalized. The alleged professionalization of the local councillor underpins a fundamental debate on the state of local politics. Does professionalization entail an asymmetry in the councillor population that is necessary to govern localities in the twenty-first century, or is it hard to comply with the very nature of representative local democracy – creating an undemocratic imbalance between professionals and laymen in local government? This chapter seeks to contribute to the debate by outlining the extent of, and relation between, layman politics and professionalization in the recruitment and career of Belgian local councillors. After scrutinizing these elements separately in a descriptive section, both are linked in a subsequent explanatory analysis, verifying whether professionalized recruitment in a given political system results in professionalized careers afterwards. The chapter uses quantitative survey data gathered from a selection of 856 Belgian local councillors.

Key Words

Professionalization – recruitment – career — local councillors – Belgium

¹ This chapter is based on an article co-authored by Prof. dr. Herwig Reynaert and Prof. dr. Kristof Steyvers. It has been accepted for publication in *Local Government Studies*.

3.1. PROFESSIONALIZED REPRESENTATIVES: *CONDITIO SINE QUA NON* OR *CONTRADICTIO IN TERMINIS*?

Even on the local level which might be considered as the cradle of amateurism, representative politics is claimed to professionalize (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). Yet as professionalization is proceeding, so is debate and controversy (Petracca, 1991; Hibbing, 1999): are professional representatives a necessary reality or do they conflict with the underpinning values of (local) democracy? Whilst the concept has moved to the centre of attention in studies of local government in general, and political recruitment and career in particular (Patzelt, 1999; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008), it has received scarce academic attention in Belgian literature thus far. To fill this void our chapter provides an account of professionalization in Belgian local government. More particularly, it tackles the symbolic question whether professionalized local councillors are a necessary asymmetry or an undemocratic imbalance.

Before we elaborate on the content of this debate and its ramifications for local democracy, however, we should conceptualize *professionalization* first. According to Eliassen and Pedersen (1978), professionalization contains multiple dimensions. The first dimension relates to the process of political recruitment, advantaging certain groups of candidates in their race to office. In this line of thought we can distinguish between intellectual and political professionalization. The former refers to councillors' calibre, furthering the odds of candidates who are higher educated and come from selective or facilitating professions (e.g. teachers, lawyers, journalists). The latter stands for "*the process by which social status gives way to political status as the basic criterion for legislative recruitment*" (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978: 291). Particularly, political parties come to structure recruitment by training and rewarding loyal party activists (Soule & Clarke, 1970; Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978; Cotta & Best, 2000). The second, and probably most familiar, dimension of professionalization occurs in the aftermath of recruitment during the actual political career. The notion of a professional politician stems from Weber's distinction between politics as an avocation and politics as a vocation (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978; Norris, 1997). The latter category denotes those citizens who are not only living *for*, but also *from* politics. For them, being a local councillor is "*a 'career' or even a 'profession', overturning the traditional image of voluntary or amateur local government representatives devoting themselves to the service of the public cause*" (Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008: 180). A professional career is then marked by an exclusive focus on the office and a longitudinal perspective (Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008; Steyvers & Verhelst, 2012).

Professionalization is thus a multi-faceted concept that relates to both political recruitment and political career. On the local level it may seem a practical and rational response to the changing and challenging government context – captured in terms such as

local governance (e.g. multiplication of horizontal and vertical governance structures) and *new public management* (e.g. efficiency-driven reforms such as planning, benchmarking and budgeting). It is supported by the expectation that professionalized councillors would be equipped to govern in an increasingly professionalized surrounding and rebalance relations with other actors in governance (e.g. local administration, private firms) (Hibbing, 1999). Considering the ubiquity and irreversibility of these evolutions, Caulfield and Larsen (2002: 17) even wonder if the days of the traditional amateur politician are numbered altogether. Yet simultaneously professionalization is contested from a democratic point of view (Norris, 1997). Indeed, the above conceptualization implies a substantial degree of selectivity and differentiation between councillors which runs counter to the principles of layman politics that often underpin local government, for instance in Belgium (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002)². Layman politics rests on the premise that each citizen should have the opportunity to govern his fellow citizens on the basis of three *sacrosanct principles*: a voluntary basis to serve the public cause, the equality of all councillors in the eyes of the law and amateurism in holding office (Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008: 180).

Professionalization may contravene these principles in three ways:

First, *professionalization in political recruitment* imposes selection criteria that systematically advantage a limited group of privileged candidates – either in terms of education and profession (intellectual component) or party affiliation and commitment (political component). In this sense neither the process of professional recruitment nor its outcome are legitimate, democratic, open and fair (Norris, 1997).

Second, considerable problems may also arise from *professionalization in political careers*. Not only are they antipodal to the principle of amateurism, professional careers are in practice often the prerogative of a particular minority of executive councillors, contrasting with councillors' legal equality as well (Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008).

Finally, it is plausible that there is a *path-dependent logic between both dimensions of professionalization*. Since political careers do not unfold out of the blue, professionalized recruitment patterns may bring about professional careers. For instance, we could imagine that high calibre councillors are more suited to grow a professional career, or, likewise, party soldiers obtain more incentives. As such the interplay of both dimensions might generate “*an autonomous breed of professional politicians*” that stands out from traditional laymen (Best & Cotta, 2000: 22), and by extension the local community at large. Petracca (1991) argues that these professional politicians are therefore

² Since the paramount *raison d'être* of Belgian local democracy consists of the political expression of community identity (De Ceuninck et al., 2005), Belgian local governments are theoretically and formally organized as representative entities based on layman politics (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002).

incompatible with – or even contradictory to – the nature of representative politics as it is commonly institutionalized in most western democracies³.

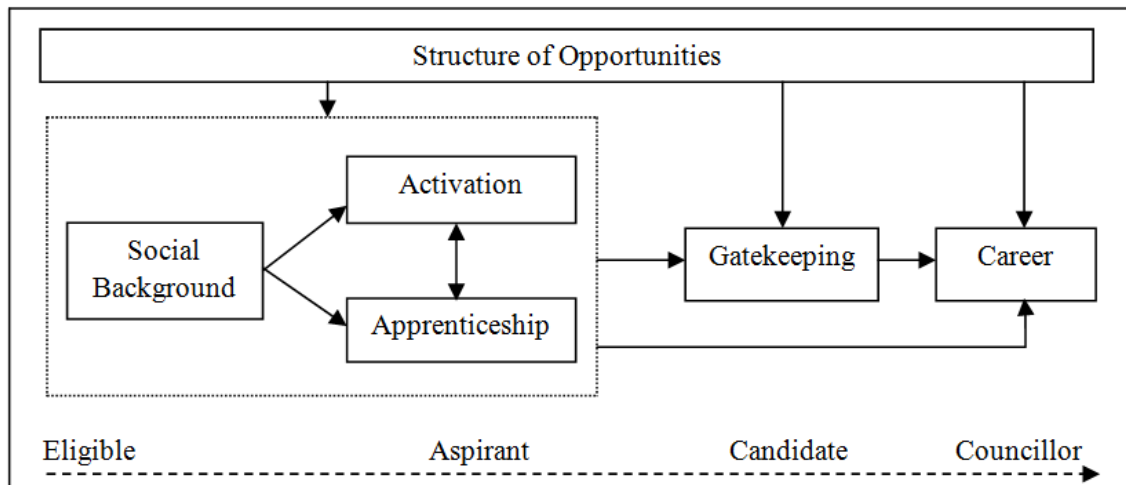
3.2. RESEARCH QUESTION, METHODS AND DATA

The aim of this chapter is to tackle the symbolic and seemingly normative research question whether professionalization in Belgian local government reflects a necessary asymmetry or an undemocratic imbalance. Obviously no definite or undisputed standards for such assessments have been established and providing clear-cut answers falls beyond the reach of this chapter. However, applying the perspective of the three criticisms raised above, and linking our data to the literature, should enable us to gain a fair understanding of the proceedings and implications of professionalization in our given context. To this end we use both descriptive and explanatory analyses.

The descriptive part deals with the first two criticisms of professionalization, referring to the acclaimed unfairness and restrictedness in recruitment, and the inequality in career development. Since professionalization is distinguished from layman politics by its degree of selectivity and differentiation, both concepts should be conceived as two ideal-types or poles on a continuum with varying stages in between (Fiorina, 1994). Discerning univariate professionalization patterns and singling out bivariate associations within the recruitment and career dimensions provides useful clues to address these criticisms. In order to practically organize and structure the analyses, the chapter relies on the conceptual framework of recruitment developed by Norris (1997; see also Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Norris' framework outlines the proceedings and the most important elements and phases of recruitment leading towards a political career⁴.

³ In fact, the layman principle is typically considered to be an asset of the councillor office on the local level (Steen & Wille, 2005). In the Netherlands, for instance, reducing the need for professionalized councillors by introducing administrative support (as a part of the Dualism Act) aimed to encourage a wider variety of social groups to become a councillor (Denters et al., 2005).

⁴ According to Patzelt (1999), this theoretical model is likely to become the main paradigm for research on political recruitment. In this respect, studies make use of the conceptual framework and phasing of the model to structure analyses of recruitment in a given context (see e.g. Oxley & Fox, 2004; Van Liefferinge & Steyvers, 2008). In this chapter, we explicitly differentiate between the process of political recruitment and the political career (as a logical extension of the latter) to address the first two criticisms on professionalization. In order to address the third criticism, we treat recruitment as an independent variable to study the political system in terms of professionalization in councillor careers.

Figure 3.1. Conceptual framework of political recruitment and career

(Based on Norris & Lovenduski, 1995)

We thereby choose to specifically address the relation between professionalization and layman politics in three distinct stages. The first stage is the opportunity structure of the political system in place, consisting of the legal system, the electoral system, the structure of party competition and the political culture (*Section 3.3*). Within this general contextual stage, the actual process of political recruitment unfolds. According to Norris, this process resembles a funnel in which a large group of eligible citizens are gradually filtered out to become candidates for office. Important filters are citizen's social background, activation, apprenticeships and the system's gatekeepers (*Section 3.4*). Finally, after being recruited and elected, councillors embark on a political career at the ultimate stage of the process (*Section 3.5*).

On the other hand, the third criticism on professionalization (regarding the hypothesized path-dependent relation between professional recruitment and career) requires an explanatory analysis. In this respect a multivariate regression model illuminates the relation between recruitment and career in the context of Belgian local government. It verifies whether or not professionalized recruitment results in professionalized careers afterwards (*Section 3.6*). Finally, the conclusive section summarizes the arguments in response to the general research question and criticisms on professionalization posed at the onset of the chapter (*Section 3.7*).

The chapter uses quantitative data from 856 local councillors in Belgium, selected on the basis of a stratified random sample of 180 municipalities⁵. These data were collected through a standard postal survey in 2008. Although this fairly large and representative data set allows us to generalize much of our findings, three qualifications are in order. First, the model of Norris depicts recruitment as a process of supply and demand in which the interaction of citizens pursuing a political career with the demands of established political actors configures recruitment. However, since our research scope and data are confined to the specific group of elected councillors solely, some aspects of the recruitment process cannot be dealt with (e.g. candidates dropping out, voter preferences, party demands)⁶. Second, the survey asked councillors to personally assess their recruitment and career. Consequently some distortions could interfere with response (e.g. experience in office, social desirability). Finally, our cross-sectional research design does not allow a comprehensive hold on the longitudinal dimension that marks professionalization. Yet linking results to the literature might partly resolve this problem.

3.3. THE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE OF POLITICAL RECRUITMENT AND CAREER: LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BELGIUM

According to Norris (1997; see also Norris & Lovenduski, 1995), studies of recruitment and career should start by considering the broader context of the political system. This system determines the framework in which recruitment takes place, and structures candidates' opportunities of being selected and elected into the council. Meanwhile, such an overview allows readers to familiarize themselves with some particularities of Belgian local government that (might) figure as important determinants of professionalization in recruitment and career.

⁵ This sample was representative in terms of municipal size, region and socio-economic character. From 4096 councillors addressed, 856 or 21% returned the questionnaire after two reminders. Response is representative in terms of socio-economic character. Councillors from Flemish and larger municipalities are slightly over-represented, but not to the extent that it fundamentally distorts the general representativeness of research. Possible causes for the low response rate are survey length and a general survey reticence that seems typical for local councillors. Indeed, this survey is part of the European research project *Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance* (www.maelg.eu). From this comparative perspective, many countries in the project tend to have low response rates (results of the comparative project are forthcoming).

⁶ Voter preferences, however, seem to be less important to explain bias in representativeness. Indeed, literature suggests that they do not systematically cause or reproduce selective political elites (Norris, 1997; Rallings et al., 2010).

3.3.1. The legal system

A first element of the opportunity structure consists of the legal system and its institutionalized provisions. Although the legal system about local government is enacted at the regional level in Belgium, provisions on recruitment and career run parallel throughout the federal state. The legal system is structured as follows. On the one hand, few eligibility criteria have been established regarding political recruitment. In order to be allowed to stand for office citizens have to be at least 18 years old, hold all civic rights, hold the Belgian nationality or the nationality of an EU country, and officially reside in the municipality they aim to govern.

In terms of career, on the other hand, the legal system sets the capacity for councillors to develop a professional career (Hibbing, 1999; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). A professional legislature is marked by abundant resources such as salary, staff, committees, dual mandates and multiple terms allowed in office (Squire, 1992; Fiorina, 1994; Norris, 1997; Hibbing, 1999; Berry et al., 2000). In Belgium no formal restrictions are placed upon the number of terms in office. Since one term equals six years, incumbents can build long and stable careers. The number of councillors depends upon the size of the population in the municipality, and ranges from 7 to 55. Councils are also entitled to appoint independent staff members for parties and executives, as well as to establish standing committees. Additionally, unlike numerous countries where the accumulation of political mandates across governmental levels is prohibited, Belgian local councillors are permitted to combine their mandate with an office at the provincial, regional or national level – unless they hold several executive functions simultaneously⁷. Hence, councils and councillors seem to have enough legal scope for governing effectively and professionally.

Nevertheless, two other provisions indicate that the legal system still considers most councillors as layman politicians. First, non-executive councillors receive no more than a small remuneration per council meeting, fixed by the council within limits set by central government. Since councils meet on average ten times per year, holding a non-executive mandate provides little financial space for professionalism. Second, the absence of a genuine statute (e.g. system of political leave) for non-executive councillors makes it quasi impossible to operate as fully-fledged professionals on a daily base. Executives and mayors, however, receive a full salary and statute. They often function as part-time or – in larger municipalities – even as full-time politicians (Wayenberg et al., 2010).

⁷ Councillors are entitled to occupy an office on the European level as well, but this item was not included in the questionnaire.

3.3.2. *The electoral system*

The electoral system is a second element of the opportunity structure. Belgian local councillors are elected every six years in one district that covers the entire municipality. The ballot structure stipulates that citizens can vote for both a party list and individual candidates from the same party list. Voting for (candidates on) different party lists is thus prohibited. Council seats are allocated according to the Imperiali-system which uses a quotient that explicitly favours winning parties, and results in strong(er) majorities. Consequently, a large number of Belgian localities are governed by a single party with an absolute majority of council seats. The distribution of the latter within a party is based on candidates' individual votes and the number of party votes, which are allocated to the candidates according to their position on the party list. As such the electoral system empowers political parties in selecting candidates, paving the way for a politically professionalized recruitment process. This party dominance continues during councillors' careers as well and confirms Belgium as a typical *party government*. Accordingly, party politics partly explains why councillors from the opposition often fail to fulfil their designated role as representative, policy-maker and scrutinizer (Verhelst et al., 2011).

3.3.3. *The structure of party competition*

The structure of party competition figures as the third element of the opportunity structure. A first peculiarity distinguishes between typical local lists and (local branches of) national lists. In Belgian local government the latter started to proliferate in the aftermath of the last amalgamation gulf of 1976 (Steyvers, 2004; Reynaert et al., 2006). This evolution confirmed the acclaimed positive relation between urbanization and political professionalization as such (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978). Typical local lists that tend to be less politically professionalized still occur, although predominantly in small(er) municipalities (Reynaert et al., 2006).

A second characteristic of the structure of party competition consists of the competition between parties of different ideological background. According to Eliassen and Pedersen (1978), typical party soldiers (i.e. politically professionalized office holders) originally emerged from within the ranks of the socialist parties. Garraud (1989) affirms this argument in his study on French mayors: socialist candidates appeared to rely more often in the party as a compensation for the lack of social status⁸. In Belgium socialist parties often dominate the municipal landscape in the Walloon region. The catholic party on the other hand has a longstanding powerbase as the leading party in Flanders.

⁸ Nevertheless, the author claims that over an extended period of time, the differences between left and right mayors will gradually evaporate.

3.3.4. *The political culture*

Norris refers to the political culture as the fourth constituting element of the opportunity structure. In the Belgian context three particularities are important for recruitment and career. A first particularity is the federalization process. The fifth state reform empowered the regions Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital to organize their local government system from 2002 onwards⁹. Meanwhile, Flanders (2005) and Wallonia (2006) have installed a new local government act. Whereas the Flemish act incorporates much efficiency oriented elements that may call for professionalization (e.g. introduction of a management team, systematic planning and benchmarking), the Walloon act predominantly focuses on enhancing the democratic capacity of local government (e.g. constructive motion of distrust vis-à-vis the executive, semi-direct election of mayors) (De Ceuninck et al., 2005; Pilet, 2008).

The variance in political culture according to the size of the municipality could be a second determining element. The last round of amalgamations in Belgium (1976) resulted in a considerable up-scaling of local government¹⁰. This amalgamation discourse was underpinned by the acclaimed positive relation between professional governance and size. In fact, larger municipalities differ from smaller ones in terms of governance culture. Research in the Flemish region for instance has affirmed that committees and staff personnel are more frequently introduced in larger municipalities (Olislagers et al., 2008).

Finally, the inverted power relation between the executive body and its legislative pendant is a third distinctive element of the Belgian political culture. The council is formally conceived as the supreme body of Belgian local government¹¹. Yet whilst the system of personal monism was intended to preserve council primacy, reality seems to have worked the other way around. Research has revealed that non-executive councillors are often marginalized in practice due to the dominance of a strong executive (Verhelst et al., 2011). Additionally, it is generally acknowledged that these groups also profit more from recruitment bias as experienced and popular figures on the local scene beforehand (Wayenberg et al., 2010).

⁹ Flanders has 308 municipalities, Wallonia 262 and Brussels Capital 19.

¹⁰ Nevertheless from a comparative point of view, Belgian municipalities are rather small with an average population of around 18.000. In Brussels, the average population is above 50.000, whilst this number is around 19.500 in Flanders and around 13.000 in Wallonia.

¹¹ Executive functions are transferred to a selection of councillors who comprise the executive body, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen (i.e. *functional dualism*). These executives are elected by the council but retain their council seat and legislative mandate as well (i.e. *personal monism*). As such they remain theoretically under the scrutiny of – and thus subordinated to – the council. Only exceptionally are members appointed outside the council.

3.4. POLITICAL RECRUITMENT OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS IN BELGIUM

Within this contextual setting citizens are recruited to become elected politicians. Literature commonly conceives political recruitment as a process of intertwined filters that gradually delineate a political elite (Prewitt, 1970; Budge & Farlie, 1975; Norris, 1997). As such the concept denotes “*the process by which citizens are mobilized into politics*” (Brady et al., 1999: 153).

The basic and probably most documented filter is the citizens’ *social background* (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995). Studies of descriptive representation have profusely indicated that recruitment generates a political elite that seldom mirrors the population at large (Pitkin, 1967; Rush, 1992). Albeit local politics provides more room for equity (Phillips, 1996: 26), local politicians are still predominantly drawn from the dominant stratum of male, middle class, middle aged, autochthonous and locally anchored candidates (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993 and 1995; Aars & Offerdal, 1998; Steyvers & Reynaert, 2006; Rallings et al., 2010). Additionally, intellectual professionalization has emerged as a new form of selection. This means that high calibre candidates, i.e. highly educated and/or coming from talking and brokerage professions (e.g. teachers, lawyers), are increasingly advantaged in recruitment (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978; Norris & Lovenduski, 1993: 384-385).

A second filter consists of citizens’ *political activation and apprenticeships* (Levine & Hyde, 1977; Steyvers & Reynaert, 2006). This filter refers to citizens gradually developing an interest in politics, and/or acquiring political skills and contacts. Motivation is such an important activating factor. Different motives may spur political activism, ranging from conscription and ideology to party service and career planning (Aars & Offerdal, 1998; Fox & Lawless, 2005; Copus, 2008). Hence motivation is clearly linked to the process of professionalization (Black, 1970; Soule & Clarke, 1970). The upbringing in a political family may activate citizens as well (Prewitt, 1970; Braud, 1996). According to Van Liefferinge and Steyvers (2008), this influence should no longer be interpreted in an archaic and nepotistic way embodied in political dynasties. Rather candidates profit from this selective background by acquiring a taste for politics and learning the tricks of the trade at a younger age. Political families meanwhile serve an apprenticeship by passing on contacts and positions in vested selection networks (e.g. political parties, media). Finally, citizens can build on apprenticeships in organized community life (Moss & Parker, 1967; Prewitt, 1970; Norris, 1997). Although there are no formal schools for politics, associations often figure as informal schools (Kjaer, 2006). Indeed, citizens pick up organizational and communicative skills in this setting, allowing them to expand and draw on personal and political networks (Moyser & Parry, 1986). Laymen are thereby usually embedded in organizations of their local community whilst political parties offer outstanding apprenticeships for professionalized councillors

(Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978). Consequently, parties are claimed to be the perfect steppingstone towards a political career (Moyser & Parry, 1986; Meadowcroft, 2001; Lazarus, 2008).

At this point aspirant-councillors still have to pass the *gatekeepers* as the final filter in recruitment, before presenting themselves to the voters (Norris, 1997)¹². This implies that the supply of aspirants has to meet the demands of the established actors in the political system (i.e. the *selectorates*). Given the perceived strain on the councillor function, it is often expected that citizens will become less enthusiastic to come forward as candidates for election (Larsen, 2005). As a consequence, it is likely that this selectorate function will become more important, but also more challenging, in the recruitment process in the future (e.g. Rallings et al., 2010)¹³. When the demands of the selectorates are met, councillors may receive considerable support from the gatekeepers during elections. For professional councillors this support is typically situated in the party sphere whilst laymen theoretically draw on support from the local community.

Table 3.1 quantifies this recruitment process for our research population of Belgian local councillors in terms of traditional social background variables; motivations organized in a continuum of professionalization (citizen duty or the pure layman desire to serve the public cause, general interest in politics, the professional motive to serve the party and the desire to establish a political career); socialization in a political family; apprenticeships in the local community and political party; and gatekeeping through the support from the locality and party¹⁴.

¹² Elections and the impact of voting, however, are not considered in this study.

¹³ Our study confirms the important role of the *selectorates* in the Belgian system: 75% of the councillors indicate that they have been asked by others to stand for election the first time they were nominated. One-fourth came forward on their own (original question (Q9): “*How did you become a candidate the first time you were nominated? – I proposed myself/I was asked by others*”).

¹⁴ ‘Starting age’ and ‘local roots before mandate’ were calculated based on councillors’ age, number of years lived in the municipality, and the experience in the council. In terms of motivations, councillors were asked to rate the importance of each motive before their first candidacy on a 0-4 scale. ‘Political family’ (socialization) represents councillors who had a family member over the last two generations that had a political office. The apprenticeship variables represent computed scores for the membership of/and elective office in: trade unions and business/professional organizations, humanitarian, sport, women, environmental, ethnic minority, religious and neighbourhood organizations on the one hand; and political party on the other hand. For the gatekeeping variables, an exploratory factor analysis on a list of 12 variables resulted in two additive indices (scale 0-4): ‘support locality’ and ‘support party’. ‘Support locality’ includes support from ‘local prestigious person’, ‘trade union’, ‘local business group’, ‘women organization’, ‘local media’, ‘the church’, ‘local association’ and ‘ethnic groups’; ‘Support party’ includes support from ‘national party organs’, ‘party fraction’, ‘party at the local level’ and ‘national politician’.

Table 3.1. Political recruitment of Belgian local councillors

Filter	Variable	Category	Value
Social Background	Gender (N=845)	Male	72.4 %
		Female	27.6 %
	Starting age (N=841)	< 30 years	19.7 %
		30 – 60 years	76.4 %
		> 60 years	3.9 %
		<i>Mean (stand. dev.)</i>	39.8 years (10.9)
	Local roots before mandate (N=840)	< 15 years	14.6 %
		15 – 35 years	48.7 %
		> 35 years	36.7 %
		<i>Mean (stand. dev.)</i>	30.2 years (13.7)
	Ethnic roots (N=843)	National	92.9 %
		Foreign	7.1 %
	Education (N=844)	Elementary school	3.3 %
		Secondary school	32.4 %
		University/equivalent	64.3 %
	Profession before mandate (N=766)	Civil servant	14.2 %
		Teacher	14.1 %
		Liberal	6.8 %
		Business manager	5.1 %
		Professional politician	3.1 %
		Other (not talk./brok.)	56.7 %
Activation	Citizen duty motive (N=834)	Very/utmost important	40.2 %
		<i>Mean (st. dev.), scale 0-4</i>	2.1 (1.2)
	Political interest motive (N=839)	Very/utmost important	68.7 %
		<i>Mean (st. dev.), scale 0-4</i>	2.9 (1.0)
	Party duty motive (N=837)	Very/utmost important	49.8 %
		<i>Mean (st. dev.), scale 0-4</i>	2.4 (1.0)
	Political career motive (N=835)	Very/utmost important	12.1 %
		<i>Mean (st. dev.), scale 0-4</i>	1.1 (1.1)
Apprentice-ships	Political family socialization (N=845)	No	68 %
		Yes	32 %
	Local community (N=743)	No member /office	6.9 %
		Member only	37 %
		Member and office	56.1 %
	Political party (N=767)	No member /office	12 %
		Party member only	25.3 %
		Party member and office	62.7 %
Gate-keepers	Support locality (N=793)	(Very) strong	2.5 %
		<i>Mean (st. dev.), scale 0-4</i>	0.8 (0.7)
	Support party (N=806)	(Very) strong	35.5 %
		<i>Mean (st. dev.), scale 0-4</i>	1.9 (0.9)

Table 3.1 suggests that *traditional social bias* remains deeply rooted in Belgian municipal councils. Despite gender quota for party lists that have made the electoral odds more even (Pilet et al., 2007a), men still dominate most councils. The average councillor is also middle-aged (40 years) when first entering office and has strong local roots – expressed by the number of years he/she resided in the municipality prior to this office (30 years on average). The ethnic stereotype is affirmed by the small share of our research population (7 per cent) who were born abroad, or have parents who were born abroad¹⁵. In addition to these traditional biases, we find clear signs of *intellectual professionalization* as well. The majority of Belgian local councillors (64 per cent) are highly educated and nearly half of the councillors had a talking or brokerage profession prior to their first mandate.

In terms of *activation*, Table 3.1 shows that layman motives still outweigh professional counterparts, both in the centre (‘political interest’ versus ‘represent party’) and at the extremes (‘citizen duty’ versus ‘professional career’) of our continuum. Still, one-third of the councillors have been socialized and activated in a political family. Frequency distributions also underline that the local community remains an important *apprenticeship* for Belgian local councillors: 37 per cent are (or were) mere members, and 56 per cent hold (or held) office in at least one local association. Yet the proliferation of political parties is equally vast: over 60 per cent of the local councillor population were party members before entering office and are (or had been) a member of the party’s organization at the (supra-)local level. Only a minority have not been socialized in the sphere of party politics at all. Finally, parties are important *gatekeepers* in recruitment too. Belgian councillors clearly indicate having received more support from the party than from the local community during elections.

In summary: Belgian local councils are not representative of the population at large. Ancient stereotypes such as the underrepresentation of women and young citizens and the importance of family ties persist, although literature shows that they are incrementally decreasing over time (Devos et al., 1997; Reynaert et al., 2006). Further, the entrenchment in the local community and layman motivations remain important assets in recruitment. Yet simultaneously professionalization is advancing, both in its intellectual and political form (Reynaert et al., 2006). How should we perceive the impact of professionalization on the recruitment process? In order to answer this question we will consider the associations between the variables of recruitment¹⁶. Effects of professionalization seem ambiguous:

¹⁵ After granting non-EU citizens – who are residing in their municipality for at least 5 years – the right to vote in local elections from 2006 on, we could expect that this percentage will increase.

¹⁶ In order to decrease the sparseness of the analyses (the cross-tables of the original variables produced many empty cells), we use the re-coded dummy variables (see further in the regression analysis) to

- To some extent, *intellectual* professionalization may hold emancipatory potential. For instance, traditionally underprivileged groups such as women and councillors without strong local roots tend to be higher educated than their counterparts ($\Phi=.10$, $p=.01$; $\Phi=.21$, $p=.00$). High education also compensates for the lack of party motivation ($\Phi=-.08$, $p=.02$) whilst councillors who had a talking or brokerage profession prior to their first mandate were more inspired by citizen duty ($\Phi=.10$, $p=.01$).
- *Political* professionalization on the other hand rather enforces existing bias in recruitment, or creates new selective pathways to the council. Men and autochthonous councillors were for instance slightly more embedded in the political party before their first mandate than women and councillors with foreign roots ($\Phi=.09$, $p=.01$; $\Phi=.08$, $p=.03$). Besides, councillors who felt strong support from the party during elections already relied more on local and political apprenticeships ($\Phi=.10$, $p=.01$; $\Phi=.17$, $p=.00$), a motivation to represent the party ($\Phi=.21$, $p=.00$), high education ($\Phi=.11$, $p=.00$) and support from the locality ($\Phi=.25$, $p=.00$). Councillors driven by professional party and career motives felt more support from the locality in the election as well ($\Phi=.11$, $p=.00$; $\Phi=.11$, $p=.00$).
- Finally, substantial differences arise between older and younger *first-time councillors*. Older novices are less professionalized in terms of political career motive ($\Phi=-.14$, $p=.00$), education ($\Phi=-.13$, $p=.00$), party apprenticeship ($\Phi=-.08$, $p=.02$) and party support ($\Phi=-.07$, $p=.04$). They feel they have had less support from the local community in the election ($\Phi=-.07$, $p=.04$) as well, but more often rely on a talking or brokerage profession ($\Phi=.11$, $p=.00$) and local community apprenticeships ($\Phi=.08$, $p=.03$).

calculate the associations. These dummies reduce the original variable into two categories: the professional (or most selective) group of councillors versus the other councillors. Significant associations are only mentioned insofar as they contribute to answering the research question.

3.5. POLITICAL CAREER OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS IN BELGIUM

The second dimension of professionalization refers to the political career that councillors establish once they have been recruited and elected. Whilst its sense may seem a matter of course, Guérin and Kerrouche (2008) argue in favour of being reticent about defining a ‘professional career’. They suggest using indicators as a means to operationalize the concept. A first indicator is the time councillors dedicate to councillor work (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). Whereas professional councillors have to decide whether to sacrifice (a part of) their external career or not, the key question for laymen is whether they are able to combine council work with the external career (Fiorina, 1994: 307). Incumbency is a second indicator. Councillors who develop long careers via successive terms in office gain experience and skills to function as professionals (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978; Cotta & Best, 2000; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). From the opposite point of view, turnover is considered to be an indispensable feature of layman politics (Fiorina, 1994)¹⁷. A third indicator of professional careers, particularly in Belgian governance, is the *cumul des mandats*. Accumulating mandates is typical for countries in which local government’s limited capacity to deliver public services in an autonomous way is compensated for by politicians’ access to central level(s) of decision-making (De Ceunink et al., 2005). Finally, a fourth indicator is councillors’ ambitions at the end of their mandate (Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). Professionals typically hold static or – above all – progressive ambitions, aiming to prolong their mandate or continue their career in a higher office. Amateur-politicians are more likely to return their mandate to society and make room for new *citizen-legislators* after their mandates are completed (Petracca, 1991).

Taken together, these indicators present an ideal-typical image of both the *focus* of the councillor office (i.e. an exclusive political career in terms of time and multiple offices for professionals versus a career on the side for laymen) and the *perspective* of the councillor office (i.e. lengthy careers and static or progressive ambitions for professionals versus shorter careers and discrete ambitions for laymen).

¹⁷ As Petracca (1991) argues, the advantages of rotation in office are manifold: not only does it guarantee the circulation of layman citizens, it also ensures the necessarily representative link between society and government whilst safeguarding society from ‘permanent’, undemocratic and unmediated governments.

Table 3.2. Political career of Belgian local councillors

Variable	Category	Value
Time in office (N=798)	< 30 hours/month	53 %
	30 – 59 hours/month	30.7 %
	60 – 89 hours/month	8.2 %
	90 – 119 hours/month	3.6 %
	> 119 hours/month	4.5 %
	<i>Mean (Stand. Dev.)</i>	<i>41.1 hours/m (43.2)</i>
Incumbency (N=848)	1st term (< 3 years)	36.4 %
	2nd term (3 – 8 years)	25 %
	3th term (9 – 14 years)	16.3 %
	4th term (15 - 20 years)	11.9 %
	> 4 terms (> 20 years)	10.4 %
	<i>Mean (Stand. Dev.)</i>	<i>9.9 years (9.1)</i>
Cumul des mandats (N=804)	Never	90.7 %
	Legislative office in past	3.5 %
	Executive office in past	0.9 %
	Legislative office at present	4.5 %
	Executive office at present	0.4 %
Future ambitions (N=759)	Discrete	25.7 %
	Static	42.5 %
	Progressive	31.8 %

Table 3.2 shows that despite claims of progressing professionalization, the career of the average Belgian local councillor is still situated at the layman end of our continuum. Nevertheless we find large variation between and within the variables. Councillors spend on average 40 hours per month on council work, varying from a modest two to an acclaimed 400 hours per month¹⁸. Elite circulation is apparent as well: turnover rate amounts to 36 per cent whilst the average councillor has ten years of experience, equalling less than two terms in office. Yet 20 per cent of the research population also stay for more than three terms in office. Furthermore, a minority of the councillor population (are able to) accumulate elective mandates: for 90 per cent of our research population political commitment is confined to local politics¹⁹. Finally, in terms of future

¹⁸ In Appendix C, we present a detailed overview of councillors' time spent on the office. The overview shows that councillors spend most time on the council and committee meetings (23%), as well as on desk work preparing those meetings (16%). Also the party (14%) and the party group (11%) seem important aspects of the office. *Other* activities account for 14% of councillors' time spent on the office. A wide variety of representative tasks forms the largest group of this category. Finally, councillors spend 9% of their mandate to public debates and meetings, 7% to meetings with the administrative staff and 6% to field visits to municipal institutions.

¹⁹ This low rate is not a real surprise since the total number of local mandates (approx. 13.000) largely exceeds the total number of supra-local mandates (approx. 1.300). If we would consider the *cumul des mandats* the other way around, i.e. politicians at the supra-local level simultaneously holding a local

ambitions professionalization is more outspoken. Nearly one-third of the councillor population hold progressive ambitions, consciously conceiving their local mandate as a steppingstone towards a career in higher office or provincial, regional or national politics. The majority seek to stay in office whilst one out of four councillors expresses the intention to leave.

Thus, referring to *the* Belgian local councillor in terms of political career would be too blunt and vague. Some councillors are obviously far more professionalized in certain aspects of their career than others. Again this evokes the question whether professionalization occurs systematically, crosscutting councillor equality and creating an undemocratic imbalance in the local council. Analyses of the associations between our career variables suggest that this is partly the case²⁰. The group of experienced councillors spend slightly more time in office and more often hold dual mandates than the group of less experienced councillors ($\Phi=.08$, $p=.02$; $\Phi=.25$, $p=.00$). Likewise, councillors who spend much time in office more often have progressive ambitions for their future career than councillors dedicating less time to council work ($\Phi=.12$, $p=.00$). These results might imply that professionalization further develops during councillors' career, gradually moulding a political elite of professionalized councillors. On the other hand, experienced incumbents tend to hold less progressive ambitions at the end of their mandate ($\Phi=-.15$, $p=.00$), although the age-effect probably accounts for this result as well.

3.6. PROFESSIONALIZED PASSAGES TO POWER? AN EXPLANATORY ANALYSIS OF THE RELATION BETWEEN POLITICAL RECRUITMENT AND POLITICAL CAREER IN BELGIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The disentangled study of recruitment and career has demonstrated that there is substantial selectivity in the Belgian local councillor population in terms of professionalization. To complete our analysis we will now tackle the path-dependent criticism on professionalization, verifying whether councillors who develop a professional career are products of a preceding professionalized recruitment process.

We will use a binary logistic regression model to scrutinize this relation. Following Norris' model of recruitment (1997) we assume that careers result from a series of intertwined filters that structure recruitment within the overreaching opportunity structure of Belgian local government. The dependent level of analysis, political career, is

mandate, high figures would stand out, confirming localities as the *base office* of Belgian politicians (Pilet et al., 2007c).

²⁰ Associations have been calculated based on the dummy variables that are used in the regression analyses further on in order to reduce the sparseness of the analyses.

operationalized through the variables ‘time in office’, ‘incumbency’, ‘cumul des mandats’ and ‘future ambitions’ which have been re-coded into dummies (assuming value 0 or 1). The value 1 represents the professional (or most selective) group of councillors. On the dependent level these are the councillors who spend a lot of time in office, develop a long career, combine(d) several mandates and hold progressive ambitions²¹.

The first set of variables on the independent level covers the opportunity structure of Belgian local government. In the theoretical overview ‘region’ appeared to be an important asset of both the political culture, structure of party competition and legal system in Belgian local government. ‘Party position’ refers to the impact of parties in the electoral system and beyond (e.g. power gap between majority and opposition). ‘Party type’ and ‘party ideology’ serve as indicators for the structure of party competition, pointing to the difference between national lists and local lists, and the (acclaimed) singularity of socialist parties. Finally, political culture is embodied by the variables ‘size’ and ‘mandate’²².

Social background represents the second set of independent variables in the analysis. Typical characteristics are ‘gender’, ‘age’ (before the first mandate), ‘local roots’ (i.e. numbers of years lived in the municipality before the first mandate) and ‘ethnic roots’ (i.e. being born or having a parent who was born abroad). ‘Education’ and ‘profession’ (prior to the first mandate as a councillor) represent intellectual professionalization. Activation and apprenticeships are operationalized through the motives ‘citizen duty’, ‘political interest’, ‘represent party’ and ‘political career’, the socialization in a ‘political family’, and ‘local community apprenticeship’ and ‘political party apprenticeship’. Finally, ‘support locality’ and ‘support party’ represent the system’s gatekeepers²³. Table 3.3 presents the results from the regression analysis.

²¹ We chose to re-code these variables into dummies based on their skewed frequency distributions (see Table 3.2), and in order to enhance the model’s parsimony and comparative strength (some variables are nominal or ordinal). Dummies are: ‘Time in office [High]’: councillors spending > 60 hours per month in office, N=130 or 16.3%; ‘Incumbency [Long]’: councillors with > 14 years of experience, N=189 or 22.3%; ‘Cumul des mandats [Yes]’: councillors who hold/held at least one additional mandate, N=75 or 9.3%; ‘Future Ambitions [Progressive]’: councillors who hold progressive ambitions, N=241 or 31.8%.

²² These variables have been re-coded into dummies for similar reasons (skewed univariate frequency distributions, enhancing the model’s parsimony and comparative strength). Dummies are: ‘Region [Flanders]’: councillors from a Flemish municipality, N=565 or 66.5%; ‘Party position [Majority]’: councillors from a majority party, N=518 or 63.7%; ‘Party type [National party]’: councillors elected on a list of a national party, N=616 or 72.9%; ‘Party ideology [Socialist]’: councillors from a socialist party, N=165 or 21.5%; ‘Size [Populous]’: the third of respondents from the biggest municipalities in terms of inhabitants, N=284 or 33.7%; ‘Mandate [Executive]’: councillors who hold/held an executive mandate, N=277 or 33.3%.

²³ These variables have been re-coded into dummies for similar reasons (skewed univariate frequency distributions, enhancing the model’s parsimony and comparative strength). Dummies are: ‘Gender

[Male]': male councillors, N=612 or 72.4%; 'Age [Elder]': councillors older than 44 years at the start of their first office, N=281 or 33.4%; 'Local roots [Strong]': councillors residing for at least 37 years in their municipality prior to their first elective mandate in that municipality, N=283 or 33.7%; 'Ethnic roots [Yes]': councillors who (or whose parents) were born abroad, N=60 or 7.1%; 'Education [University]': councillors with a university degree, N=543 or 64.3%; 'Profession [Talking/brokerage]': Professional politician, Civil servant/teacher and Liberal/Business, N=332 or 43.3%; Motivational dummies represent councillors who gave a score '3' or '4' (scale 0-4) to the motives 'Citizen duty' (N=335 or 40.2%), 'Political interest' (N=576 or 68.7%), 'Party duty' (N=417 or 49.8%) and 'Political career' (N=101 or 12.1%); 'Political family [Yes]': councillors who had a politically active family member in the last two generations, N=270 or 32%; 'Local community apprenticeship [Strong]': councillors active in at least one local association and its organization, N=417 or 56.1%; 'Political party apprenticeship [Strong]': councillors active in the party and its organization, N=481 or 62.7%; 'Support locality [Strong]': the third of councillors receiving most support from the locality in the election, N=260 or 32.8%; 'Support party [Strong]': the third of councillors receiving most support from the party in the election, N=286 or 35.5%.

Table 3.3. The impact of political recruitment on political career in Belgian local government. A multiple logistic regression analysis

	Time in office [High]		Incumbency [Long]		Cumul des mandats [Yes]		Future ambitions [Progressive]	
	<i>Exp</i> (B)	<i>Sign</i>	<i>Exp</i> (B)	<i>Sign</i>	<i>Exp</i> (B)	<i>Sign</i>	<i>Exp</i> (B)	<i>Sign</i>
Opportunity structure								
Region [Flanders]	2.22	**	.72		.66		.81	
Party position [Majority]	2.16	**	.48	**	.54		1.19	
Party type [National party]	1.05		1.08		1.02		1.23	
Party ideology [Socialist]	2.31	**	.61		1.41		.60	*
Size [Populous]	1.37		.94		2.65	***	1.01	
Mandate [Executive]	6.23	***	7.90	***	4.20	***	.81	
Social background								
Gender [Male]	.88		4.18	***	1.96		1.99	**
Age [Elder]	.95		.25	***	1.00		.41	***
Local roots [Strong]	.90		.82		.51		1.03	
Ethnic roots [Yes]	1.07		.57		2.07		1.76	
Education [University]	.79		.33	***	.73		1.93	**
Profession [Talking/brokerage]	.88		1.24		1.94	*	1.16	
Activation/Apprenticeships								
Citizen duty motive [High]	.78		1.12		.90		.84	
Political interest motive [High]	1.09		.61	*	1.01		1.58	*
Party duty motive [High]	2.26	**	.72		1.52		.95	
Political career motive [High]	.69		.65		.98		3.02	***
Political family [Yes]	1.17		.97		1.21		.86	
Local community appr. [Strong]	.92		1.51		1.12		1.06	
Political party appr. [Strong]	1.45		1.42		2.85	**	1.62	*
Gatekeepers								
Support locality [Strong]	1.85	*	1.70	*	1.23		.88	
Support party [Strong]	1.07		.77		2.25	**	1.10	
Model								
<i>N</i>	472		501		490		445	
<i>Nagelkerke R²</i>	.31	***	.38	***	.25	***	.17	***

(Level of Significance: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$)

3.6.1. *Time in office*

The explanatory power of our model is quite high in terms of *time councillors spend in office*: political recruitment accounts for 31 per cent of the total variance on the dependent level. However, much more than the actual process of political recruitment, it is the opportunity structure that matters for predicting councillors' time in office. Councillors from Flanders, councillors from majority parties and councillors from the socialist party have twice as much chance to dedicate a lot of time to their mandate than councillors from Wallonia and Brussels, councillors from the opposition and councillors from the other parties. Yet the best predictor is councillors' mandate. Executives have six times more chance to dedicate a lot of time to council work than non-executives. Although this result may not come as a surprise due to the supplementary executive responsibilities which extend their council work, the impact is quite large. Social background characteristics, on the other hand, do not seem to have a direct impact upon time spend in office. With regard to the activation and apprenticeships, one additional direct effect emerges: councillors who were strongly motivated by the desire to do a good job for their party in the council have twice as much chance to spend a lot of time in office than less party-driven councillors. Finally, councillors who feel they have received strong support from their local community in the election tend to spend more time in office than councillors who lacked this strong community support. This result shows that typical layman assets in recruitment may lead towards a (part of a) professional career after all.

3.6.2. *Incumbency*

The model's goodness of fit for *incumbency* is even higher, amounting to 38 per cent. Again we might attribute a fair share of this explanatory power to the opportunity structure, although this time only two variables produce strong and significant effects. First, turnover is surprisingly high amongst councillors from majority parties, whilst councillors from the opposition have double the chance of developing a long career in office. Second, one particular group forms a strong exception to this trend. Indeed, above all, executive councillors – who are de facto almost always member of the political majority – tend to establish lengthy careers in office, hence strongly correspond to the professional type again. Holding an executive mandate turns out to be the best guarantee for incumbency. We may interpret this result in two directions which probably both hold true to some extent. On the one hand, executives are often promoted after they have gained some experience in the council – and have made a name and reputation for themselves. On the other hand, executives probably develop longer careers in office once they are elected as aldermen as well. Furthermore, councillors' social background also

offers substantial explanatory power. Men have a far greater chance of acquiring a lot of experience in office whilst elder newcomers' chances are significantly smaller. Education has a surprisingly reversed impact on incumbency since higher educated councillors tend to establish shorter careers in office. Again we could interpret these results in two directions: they may reflect on the reluctance of women, elder newcomers and highly educated councillors to grow long careers – or factors preventing them from doing so (e.g. disenchantment due to lack of time or influence, time effects for elder newcomers). However, we may also interpret these effects the other way around, i.e. as signals of the general rejuvenation trend and increasing intake of women and higher educated councillors. Considering the conclusions of the descriptive section, this explanation probably holds true as well. In terms of activation and apprenticeships then, councillors who were strongly motivated by a general interest in politics tend to stay shorter in office. Finally, councillors who feel they have received strong support from the locality in the election stay generally longer in office than councillors who lacked this support.

3.6.3. *Cumul des mandats*

Our model of political recruitment explains 25 per cent of the total variance in councillors' *cumul des mandats*. The analysis reaffirms the opportunity structure of Belgian local government as a significant determinant of professionalization. In line with common assumptions, councillors from larger municipalities accumulate mandates across governmental levels more often than councillors from smaller municipalities. Not only are these councillors attractive to the party due to their larger constituency and greater recognisability, they probably have more experience with large-scale policy as well. We might interpret the effect of councillor mandate alike. In fact, executives are four times more prone to hold plural mandates than non-executive councillors, moving even further up to the professional end of our continuum. On the social background level only one variable produces an effect on *cumul des mandats* which is both strong and significant: councillors from the professionalized talking and brokerage professions have almost twice as much chance of accumulating mandates as councillors coming from another profession prior to their first mandate. Activation and apprenticeships produce one significant result as well. More specifically, the professional apprenticeship in a political party often results in a professional career in terms of *cumul des mandats* afterwards: councillors who were elected on a party list and are (or were) active in the party organization have nearly three times more chance of holding an elective political mandate in addition to their local office. Finally, gatekeepers determine the *cumul des mandats* insofar as councillors who feel they have received large support from their party in the election more frequently accumulate political offices afterwards. In sum, these results reveal a professionalized and quite closed and selective core route towards a professional

career which consists of several elective offices. This route seems far less permeable for traditional layman councillors who are deprived of party apprenticeship and support, or profit less from a favourable occupational background and the opportunity structure of Belgian local government.

3.6.4. *Future ambitions*

The results for councillors' *future ambitions* complete the multivariate analysis. Our model of political recruitment succeeds less in explaining the dependent level under study ($R^2=.17$), suggesting that more additional factors are at play. Since future ambition is a highly subjective and evolving matter it is probably determined as much by experiences inside and outside office than the recruitment process preceding it. Still quite a few strong and significant results emerge. Contrary to the previous analyses the opportunity structure does not account directly for the majority of them. The only significant relation holds that socialist councillors tend to have less progressive ambitions. We could explain the absence of an executive mandate as a significant predictor by the executives' position in the political constellation: since they already occupy a high office on the local political level and often accumulate this office with another mandate on the supra-local level, progressive ambitions may seem redundant. Yet there is another side to this story since non-executive councillors do not hold more progressive ambitions either. We would be inclined to consider this as a further hallmark of amateurism or layman politics in Belgian local government. Apparently the majority of non-executive councillors do not particularly strive for higher office in the political realm. Social background, on the other hand, is a very good predictor of future ambitions. Three strong and significant relations stand out: men, younger novices and highly educated councillors are more inclined to hold professional (i.e. progressive) ambitions at the end of their mandate. Further, professionalized activation and apprenticeships predict professional ambitions as well. Councillors who were strongly inspired by a general interest in politics and had the explicit goal of entering a political career, and councillors who are (or were) firmly embedded in the political party, are more prone to pursue a political career in higher office. Finally, gatekeepers do not seem to matter.

3.6.5. *Summary*

Should we infer from these analyses that professionalized careers originate from professionalized passages to power? At first sight we cannot corroborate this hypothesis straightforwardly. Indeed, the four indicators of a professionalized career result from different underlying recruitment mechanisms. *Time in office* is mainly determined by a

selective opportunity structure whilst professional components and layman counterparts balance each other out. *Incumbency* results from a selective recruitment process in terms of opportunity structure and social background, whilst professional paths and layman paths matter alike. The analysis of the *cumul des mandats* did point towards a professional path-dependency in support of the hypothesis. Whether councillors develop a professional career that consists of several elective mandates across governmental levels or not depends on both intellectual professionalization and political professionalization. The opportunity structure further adds to the selectivity. Finally, councillors' *future ambitions* also stem from such a professionalized passage to power. Whilst the opportunity structure has less impact, a selective social background, professional activation and party apprenticeships predict progressive ambitions.

Hence we could argue that a professionalized career is possible for councillors who were deprived of professional recruitment paths, as long as this career is confined to the local base office. Professionalized careers beyond the latter, however, seem to unfold mainly on the basis of a selective and professionalized recruitment process. On the other hand, these findings are mitigated by one transversal conclusion that truly stands out, both in terms of impact frequency, strength and significance. Indeed, it is above all the executive mandate, as a determining feature of the Belgian opportunity structure, that enables or prompts councillors to establish a truly professional career. As such a clear dichotomy in the Belgian councillor population comes forward between the group of executives that systematically develop a professionalized career and the majority of non-executive councillors who predominantly function as laymen. Additionally, these executives profit more from traditional recruitment bias as well²⁴. They tend to be male ($\Phi=.12$, $p=.00$), come from a talking or brokerage profession ($\Phi=.12$, $p=.00$), and have slightly less foreign roots ($\Phi=-.07$, $p=.04$). Furthermore, they were more often embedded in the political party before their mandate ($\Phi=.08$, $p=.04$), and even felt more support from the locality in the election ($\Phi=.10$, $p=.01$), although surprisingly not from the party. Executive councillors also entered the council at a younger age than their counterparts ($\Phi=-.16$, $p=.00$). Finally, unlike this paramount influence of councillor mandate, some particular variables of our recruitment model (party type, local roots, ethnic roots, citizen duty, political family and local community apprenticeship) did not seem to matter directly and significantly for predicting professionalization in local councillor careers.

²⁴ Associations have been calculated based on the dummy variables that were used in the regression analyses in order to reduce the sparseness of the analyses.

3.7. CONCLUSION: REBALANCING LAYMEN AND PROFESSIONALS?

This chapter addressed the alleged professionalization in the recruitment and career of Belgian local councillors based on survey data from 856 councillors. In order to draw some general conclusions we turn back to the democratic debate that surrounds professionalization. The debate is subsumed in the following quotes. On the positive side, one could posit that “*over time the ‘abstract egalitarian principles’ of ‘legislatures in their primitive states’ give way to ‘the emergence of asymmetries’ necessary for a legislature to do its job*” (Krehbiel, quoted in Hibbing, 1999: 163-164). However on the downside, “*legislatures are designed to be in tune with their environment, not to develop boundaries cordoning off that environment*” (Hibbing, 1999: 161). As such the professionalization controversy exemplifies what Dahl (1994) has phrased as the *democratic dilemma* governments face trying to reconcile system effectiveness with citizen participation. Professionalization empowers localities to govern effectively and efficiently, but true professionalism does not comply with the underpinning ethos and principles of (Belgian) local government. Since no standards have been set to establish when the optimal equilibrium between layman politics and professionalism is reached, we interpret our findings in the light of the criticisms posed at the outset of the chapter.

The analysis of councillor *recruitment* demonstrated that Belgian local councils do not constitute a representative cross-section of society. The process of political recruitment is thus not truly democratic, open and fair. Ancient social bias has historically decreased, but still exists, advantaging a privileged group of citizens in the race to office. Whilst traditional layman features remain important assets for councillors-to-be, professionalization is rising simultaneously. Yet only a minority of our research population corresponds to the image of the pure professionalized office-seeking politician. Meanwhile, the impact of professionalization is equivocal. Political professionalization adds mainly to recruitment bias and leads to new selective pathways to the council – as feared by its critics. On the other hand, intellectual professionalization might produce emancipatory effects, although we must consider that in this respect, old biases make way for new ones as well.

The analysis of councillor *careers* has demonstrated that there is ample variation in terms of professionalization. The average local councillor in Belgium still corresponds to the layman archetype in terms of career focus (i.e. time dedicated to council work, *cumul des mandats*) and incumbency. His or her ambition as a part of the career perspective, however, is often static, or even progressive, thus tending towards the professional type. Simultaneously, evidence indicated that some councillors substantially deviate from this general picture, holding office in a truly professionalized way across the different aspects of their political career. From this point of view professionalization might have rendered the principles of amateurism and, particularly, equality already obsolete in practice.

Finally, do *recruitment and career* relate in a path-dependent way? The multivariate analysis has underscored variation in councillor careers which is hardly distributed randomly. To some extent professionalized careers result from professionalized recruitment paths, especially in those aspects of the political career which surpass the local base office, such as the *cumul des mandats* and future ambitions. Nevertheless, much more than being a systematic corollary of recruitment as such, professionalized careers are rooted in the Belgian opportunity structure. In fact, it is particularly the group of executive councillors that is overwhelmingly and systematically professionalized. Since the latter profits more from traditional recruitment bias as well, we are inclined to conclude that a fairly large asymmetry between executive and non-executive councillors has arisen. These results might partly explain why bias in recruitment and career not only contrast with formal local government principles, but interfere with daily practice too. Indeed, research has revealed that exactly this asymmetry causes a democratic deficit in Belgian governance – with non-executive and opposition councillors failing to assume their role as a foundation of local democracy (Verhelst et al., 2011).

As such, the analysis confirms that professionalization does not come without important implications for local democracy. Since elements of Belgium's legal system create the preconditions for a large asymmetry in the council, reframing some formal provisions of this legal system (e.g. adjusting the remuneration system, equipping councillors with a full legal statute) could mark a first step in rebalancing and reconciling layman politics and professionalization. Yet the dominance of the executive is deeply nested in the Belgian political culture and institutional structure as well, and altering the latter is obviously much harder to accomplish.

As a concluding remark, we would like to point out that although the analysis aimed at shedding light on multiple dimensions of professionalization, some aspects fell beyond the scope of research. Accordingly, follow-up research seems indispensable to scrutinize the longitudinal dimension and impact of professionalization. Taking the perspective of the selectorate and/or voters could add some additional pieces to the puzzle as well. Furthermore, the impact of professionalization on the concrete behaviour of councillors in office, such as voting and policy preferences, forms another interesting line of enquiry. Indeed, studies have already demonstrated that recruitment might fundamentally impinge on politicians' behaviour in office (Patzelt, 1999; Back, 2006; Kjaer, 2006). Finally, transposing our results to qualitative research could help to gain more fine-grained insights, particularly in terms of councillors' personal perception of the proceedings and impact of professionalization.

CHAPTER 4

FOUNDATION OR FRAGMENT OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY?

EMPIRICALLY ASSESSING THE ROLES OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS IN BELGIAN GOVERNANCE¹

Abstract

It is often argued that the modern context of local governance conflicts with the traditional prescribed functioning of local councillors. From this perspective, we could even wonder if councillors have become fragments of local democracy instead of the foundation they are supposed to be. This chapter empirically assesses the role orientation (i.e. attitude, behaviour and discrepancy) of local councillors in Belgian governance towards their classic role-set (i.e. representation, policy and control). Besides pointing at a gap between theory and practice, it underlines a substantial discrepancy between councillors' role attitude and subsequent behaviour. This democratic deficit seems to be mainly due to the informal decision-making culture in Belgian (local) government, i.e. the dominance of the executive board and stringent party discipline, rather than place or councillors' personal characteristics.

Key Words

Local councillors, role-set, governance, democratic deficit, Belgium

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4.1. INTRODUCTION: FROM FOUNDATION TO FRAGMENT... AND BACK?

“Network society and representative politics cannot live together, nor can they stay apart” (adapted from Hendriks, 2002).

It is often claimed that the shift from government to governance has had a fundamental impact on the institutions of local representative democracy (Pratchett, 1999; Hansen, 2005). Particularly the local council and the councillors would be affected (Hendriks, 2002; Sörensen, 2006). Indeed, the municipal council is historically conceived as the heart of local representative democracy along the lines of classic institutionalist parliamentary theory (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998). Councillors are supposed to personalize this political primacy based on the prevalence of the *layman rule* in Belgian local government (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). Hence, they are considered to be the foundation of local democracy.

This classic institutionalization was envisaged to ensure traditional democratic government. However, the emergence of governance is often said to conflict with this institutionalization. Governance originated from the perceived government failure in dealing with complex problems (e.g. the reformed welfare state, issues of scale, the individualization of citizens) that involve different and often conflicting values (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Sörensen, 2006; Steyvers et al., 2006; Klijn, 2008). These challenging issues called for local policy coordination that included different actors at different levels, both public and private, incorporating those different values (Klijn, 2008). Consequently, local councillors were no longer the sole sovereign rulers in local politics, and they lost their ultimate *political primacy* (Sörensen, 2006). Councillors therefore associate governance with losing power (Aars & Fimreite, 2005). In Belgium, the emergence and growth of policy-networks have placed these layman-politicians under pressure to the extent of being “*marginalized*” (De Rynck & Voets, 2006: 60). Instead of acting as the foundation of local democracy, councillors may have become fragments of the latter:

“more and more, ordinary councillors find themselves playing a role that implies simply overlooking from afar the political decisions decided upon, whilst they are increasingly removed from the reality of those decisions” (Rao, cited in Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008: 183).

This alleged democratic deficit might be a good example of what Pratchett (1999) has called the failing government institutions in governance. Since this debate touches upon some fundamental principles of local democracy, there is a growing concern – both theoretical and legal – about the expected behaviour of councillors (Tops & Zouridis, 2002). As a response, “*a search is on for new ways and means to bring elected councillors ‘back on stage’ and to the centre of local decision and policy making*” (Hansen, 2001: 119). Belgian reforms at the turn of the millennium tried to strengthen the

position of local councillors as well. For instance, in Flanders the council became authorized to elect its own president and councillors acquired information and delegation rights whilst in Wallonia a constructive motion of distrust vis-à-vis the executive was introduced². Re-empowering the council and councillors was thus an explicit goal of the new regional local government acts (Suykens, 2001; Pilet, 2008)³. However, in spite of the promising ambitions of these reforms, results seem to be more of a renovation than the real revolution that was deemed necessary to change things around.

We feel that in order to implement successful changes, a thorough empirical analysis of the problem and its causes is indispensable first. Yet, the alleged democratic deficit of councillors' defective role-fulfilment has rarely been scrutinized empirically. Although there is a rapidly growing body of literature concerning governance (Klijn, 2008), it often focuses on political leaders only (see Steyvers et al., 2006 for Belgium; or Bäck et al., 2006 for a comparative European perspective). Still, the importance and relevance of empirically studying the role of local councillors in governance is stressed as well (Aars & Fimreite, 2005). Furthermore, the studies that do focus on local councillors in governance often take a qualitative approach (Klijn, 2008). In Belgian literature direct empirical assessments of local councillors' roles in the context of modern governance seem scarce too.

This chapter tries to fill this gap by assessing the role orientation of local councillors in Belgium both theoretically and empirically. Such an approach mainly exemplifies the *governing tradition* of governance studies, which focuses on the connection of governance networks to traditional institutions (Klijn, 2008)⁴. In doing so, the analysis seeks to find an answer to the following question: 'Do local councillors in Belgian governance act as the foundation of local democracy, or are they rather a fragment of it?'

² Meanwhile, Wallonia and Brussels Capital have introduced the possibility for the councillors to elect the council president as well.

³ Flanders introduced the *Municipal Decree* in 2005, and Wallonia introduced the *Walloon Code of Local Democracy* in 2006. The Brussels Capital region has not introduced a genuine new local government act yet.

⁴ Our aim is not to analyze councillors' role orientation in a specific governance network (e.g. inter-municipal cooperation) or to analyze the impact of governance in a longitudinal way, however. Rather we consider local governance as the overarching environment or opportunity structure in which contemporary policymaking takes place, and which determines the way in which councillors fulfil their basic role-set (e.g. through interaction with citizens, other government levels, private actors, etc.).

4.2. RESEARCH GOALS, METHODS AND DATA

The symbolic nature of this fundamental research question requires us to specify more precise research goals and derived measurable questions. The goal of this chapter is twofold. It aims to (1) to explore councillors' role orientation in practice and (2) to expose its underlying factors.

First, we describe the role orientation of Belgian local councillors as the combination of their role attitude, role behaviour and role discrepancy. To interpret the role attitude and role behaviour we compare councillors' empirical self-evaluations with the formal-legal demands of the local system. As such we are able to refute or confirm the claim that Belgian local councillors do not assume their assigned roles of *political primacy*, thus testing the presumed democratic deficit in their functioning. We consider both principles (i.e. *role attitude*) and practices (i.e. *role behaviour*) to that end. Attitudes and behaviour are two constituting aspects of a role, defined as "*the sum of institutionalized expectations with regard to the behaviour of the actors in question*" (Sörensen & Torfing, 2003: 624). Indeed, several authors recognize the importance of councillor attitudes as a prior step towards democratic role behaviour (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Denters & Klok, 2003). This holds particularly true in governance: "*what stands in the way for a strong representative democracy under conditions of governance is first and foremost the way many politicians perceive the politician's role*" (Sörensen, 2006: 99). Subsequently, we address the *discrepancy* between both role-aspects by quantifying the difference in role attitude and role behaviour.

Second, we expose the underlying factors of this role attitude, behaviour and discrepancy. More specifically, we verify if place, personal characteristics and the typical informal decision-making culture matter in predicting local councillor roles in Belgium. This analysis is based on concrete research hypotheses, developed further in the chapter (Section 4.5).

Our data stem from the Belgian contribution to a European comparative research project *MAELG* that is concerned with municipal councils and councillors. After selecting 180 municipalities on the basis of a stratified random sample, a questionnaire has been sent out to every councillor of those municipalities – creating a representative sample of 4096 councillors. We ended up with a research population of 856 cases⁵. The questions enquired upon personal assessments of the councillor roles. Notwithstanding some degree

⁵ The population of Belgian municipalities (589) was grouped in 62 strata on the base of three selection variables: population, region and socio-economic character. The strata were internally as homogenous as possible, whilst being externally maximally heterogeneous. Three (or exceptionally two) municipalities were randomly selected from each stratum. Mayors and aldermen were also addressed as they retain their seat in the council whilst being executives. The questionnaires were sent out in June 2008. Afterwards, two follow-ups (September 2008 and October 2008) increased response to 21%.

of subjectivity that is inherent to such self-evaluations, results of this type of analysis are often shown to be consistent with more detailed counterparts of decision-making processes (Denters, 2006).

The chapter continues by outlining the formal role-set of local councillors in Belgium (*Section 4.3*), before examining this role-set in practice (*Section 4.4*). Afterwards, it discerns a set of factors that could account for the variance in councillor roles (*Section 4.5*) before tackling the explanatory research goal (*Section 4.6*). In the conclusion (*Section 4.7*), we present the general results and raise some tentative perspectives for the future.

4.3. THE CLASSIC COUNCILLOR ROLE-SET

The role of local councillors is to a large extent determined by the institution in which they function, i.e. the municipal council (Sörensen & Torfing, 2003). As the only directly elected body of local democracy, the council's role is contingent upon local government's conception as "*an important link between the political-administrative system and the citizens*" (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a: 12). As such, all local governments serve two main functions: the production of public services for citizens (i.e. the output function), and the integration and education of citizens in politics (i.e. the input function). Whilst the former establishes local government as a first administration, the latter turns it into a democratic base for the local community (Steyvers & Reynaert, 2003).

The demands for local government to be both democratic and efficient in implementing these functions are transposed to the classic role-set of the councillors. On the input side of the system, they have a role as representative of the citizens (Rao et al., 1994). They translate the needs and issues from society in political actions and establish a reliable and effective link between citizens and politics (Heywood, 2002). The output function of local government results in a double role as administrator of local affairs (Rao et al., 1994). On one hand, councillors should set general policy goals and direct public service delivery. On the other hand, councillors are expected to control the implementation of local policy afterwards as well. The combination of representation, policy and control has been crystallized as councillors' classic role-set from way back up to now (De Rynck, 2000; Steen & Wille, 2005). It theoretically and ideal-typically places councillors in charge of all aspects of municipal governance as "*sovereign rulers who hold all the power, and, therefore, all the responsibility*" (Sörensen & Torfing, 2009: 254).

It is argued, however, that Belgian local councillors fail to assume this designated role-set in practice, especially in the output side of their mandate. The main argument is that "*the municipal council no longer controls the executive and is failing to dominate the local*

policy process” (Steen & Wille, 2005: 445). The representative role, on the other hand, would be less affected due to the nature of Belgian local government (Kalk & De Rynck, 2003). Indeed, from a comparative perspective Belgium is classified amongst the Southern-style countries in which the notion of *political localism* prevails. As such, its local governments are first and foremost conceived as political communities with a distinctive identity, rather than being first-hand service providers (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998; Steyvers, 2007).

4.4. BETWEEN PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE: ROLE-DISCREPANCY OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS IN BELGIUM

The classic role-set of local councillors in Belgium entails three basic roles: representation, policy, and control. Our questionnaire included three variables that served as indicators for these roles:

- ‘*Representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society*’;
- ‘*Defining the main goals of the municipal activity*’;
- ‘*Controlling the municipal activity*’.

The respondents were asked to indicate (1) the *importance* they attach to the roles, reflecting their ‘*role attitude*’; and (2) their *personal contribution* to the roles, reflecting their ‘*role behaviour*’. Scores could vary from 0 (i.e. no importance/contribution) to 4 (i.e. very great importance/contribution). The results from these questions allow us to quantify the alleged democratic deficit in local councillors’ role-fulfilment: (1) to what extent do the councillors support their designated role-set and (2) to what extent do they (claim to) act accordingly? Furthermore, we constructed a new variable (‘*role discrepancy*’) that reflects the discrepancy between role attitude and role behaviour. Scores on the variable could vary from -4 (minimum score for attitude, maximum score for behaviour) to 4 (maximum score for attitude, minimum score for behaviour). Whilst the *negative* scores do not pose many problems from a democratic point of view directly (as councillors contribute more to a role in practice than the importance they initially paid to it), *positive* scores do. The respondent namely attaches a certain importance to the role, but is not able to fulfil it to the same extent.

Table 4.1 presents the mean scores, standard deviations and percentage support (i.e. high or very high importance/contribution) for the classic role-set at the attitudinal and behavioural level. For the role discrepancy, we display the mean scores, standard deviations and the percentage of respondents who substantially fail to match their role

attitude with corresponding role behaviour (i.e. rating their role behaviour 2 to 4 points lower than their role attitude)⁶.

Table 4.1. Role attitude, behaviour and discrepancy of Belgian local councillors

	Attitude			Behaviour			Discrepancy		
	X [0-4]	S	3-4 %	X [0-4]	S	3-4 %	X [-4 - 4]	S	2-4 %
Representation	3.3	0.7	88.3	2.8	0.8	66.3	0.5	0.9	11.8
Policy	3.1	0.9	77.9	2.2	1.1	39.2	0.9	1.2	27.2
Control	3.1	0.8	80.2	2.6	0.9	52.2	0.5	1.0	15.5

(Representation: N=844, 842, 833; Policy: N=836, 841, 826; Control: N=839, 846, 830)

In terms of their **role attitude**, local councillors definitely acknowledge their triple role. Indeed, they think that all three components of their role-set are at least ‘important’ on average. The representative role generates the strongest support, confirming our foregoing theoretical arguments. The vast majority of Belgian local councillors (88.3%) believe it is (very) important to represent the requests and issues emerging from local society. Furthermore, 77.9% of the councillors underline the importance of defining the main goals of municipal policy as well, while controlling this policy is an important task for 80.2% of the respondents. Thus, local councillors in Belgium seem to principally comply with the notion of *democratic foundation* that both theory and legislation impose on them.

However, the analysis of councillors’ **role behaviour** shows a different picture. Whilst the reciprocal relation between the three roles is confirmed generally, the substantial lower scores and the larger mutual differences between the roles in practice is striking. The representative role is best fulfilled in practice too (with a ‘great’ contribution to the role on average), followed by control (‘moderate’ to ‘great’ contribution on average) and policy (‘moderate’ contribution on average)⁷. Whereas still 66.3% of the councillors see

⁶ Graphical presentations of the role attitude and role behaviour are also presented in Appendix D.

⁷ Still, the dominance of the representational role does not imply that councillors spend most of their time in office to outward-looking activities (see Appendix C). In fact, the representational role might, for instance, entail specific case-work (as strategic policy-making is clearly less dominant in the council) or, more generally, the *politics of presence* or debate in the council. By calling attention to very specific dossiers which relate to people’s daily lives and their own sphere of interest, councillors then act as a conduit between the local community and the political system.

themselves actually representing requests and issues from local society, only 52.2% of the respondents answer the same regarding control. Furthermore, no more than 39.2% define their actual contribution to local policy making as (very) great. These results confirm the claim pointing at the limited influence of Belgian local councillors in practice. They do not seem to function as a democratic foundation, revealing a democratic deficit between theory and practice.

The third variable underscores the **discrepancy** between role attitude and role behaviour. Councillors face the lowest role discrepancy in terms of representation and control. Still, more than one out of every ten councillors (11.8% for representation and 15.5% for control) strongly feel that they cannot contribute as much to these roles as they would want to. The most problematic role is policy-making: more than one out of every four councillors (27.2%) feel a strong discrepancy in this role. Hence, the Belgian councillors do not practice what they preach, reflecting a second democratic deficit in the system. Over and above the gap between theory and practice, the difference between councillors' role attitude and role behaviour is remarkable. In our view, the latter should even cause more concern, as it implies that certain factors hinder councillors from assuming their prescribed and internalized role-set. Scrutinizing these factors and their impact is the second, explanatory, goal of this chapter⁸.

4.5. DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT AS THE RESULT OF A CHANGING LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM?

In order to select the factors that could predict local councillors' role orientation, we turn to evolutions in the wider opportunity structure of the local system and the informal rules of the game in the Belgian (local) system. First, we address the question if place and personal characteristics matter (see e.g. Rao et al., 1994). Evolutions on these levels could help to explain and substantiate the influence of the shift to local governance, which is claimed to have substantially exacerbated the problem of councillors' role-fulfilment (Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). Afterwards, we verify the influence of the Belgian informal decision-making culture, for "*successful reform depends as much on cultural change as on structural and procedural measures*" (Steen & Wille, 2005: 460). This culture partly acknowledges the historic continuity of local councillors' functioning in Belgium (see De Rynck, 2007), but is claimed to have intensified in modern governance as well (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010).

The selected variables serve as predictors for a regression analysis. Therefore, we transpose them over to specific research hypotheses. These hypotheses are applied to the

⁸ The discrepancy between role attitude and role behaviour is also graphically presented in Appendix D.

analysis of both role attitude and role behaviour, as the latter two are supposed to coincide on a theoretical-formal base (the hypotheses are summarized in Box 4.1 further on)⁹. On the other hand, we expect the analysis of councillors' role discrepancy to be somewhat different. In fact, this variable is the resultant of the empirical comparison of councillors' role attitude and role behaviour. Consequently, we could for instance expect that the effect of one variable upon councillors' role attitude is compensated or overturned by the impact of other variables upon councillors' role behaviour, and vice versa. This is why we do not explicitly apply our research hypotheses to the analysis of councillors' role discrepancy.

4.5.1. Place

The first variable of the general environment or opportunity structure of the Belgian local system that could affect councillors' role orientation is '*region*'. According to the traditional local government typologies, local government in Belgium has limited functions, low discretion, and high access to the centre (Page & Goldsmith, 1987). Moreover, its input function outweighs the output oriented public service delivery, rendering local government foremost a political expression of the local identity (Hesse & Sharpe, 1991). Typologies are not always clear-cut, however, as especially modern federal states such as Belgium are difficult to fit into this picture (Goldsmith & Page, 2010).

The Belgian federal state is comprised of three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital) which are functionally and legally equal to each other – and to the federal state. Meanwhile, regionalization has been one of the most important political trends of the past decades in Belgium (Plees, 2005). Since the state reform of 2002, the main local legislation powers have been transferred to the regions. Subsequent reforms revealed a diverging focus between these regions: whereas Flemish reforms were far more administration-driven, Brussels and Wallonia principally continued to advocate local governments' representative input function (Pilet, 2008)¹⁰. This leads us to wonder whether Flanders is drifting away from the Southern system towards a more Northern public service-directed local government system, translated in new goals of efficiency and effectiveness. As such, '*region*' is the first predictor in our analysis. We expect that:

⁹ Basically, the hypotheses are phrased in light of councillors' endurance of the basic dilemma dance in office, i.e. the trade-off or delicate balance between representation on the input side of the political system and administration/governing on the output side of the system.

¹⁰ Recent changes in the local system of these regions however have sought to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the municipal governance as well.

- *‘Councillors from the Flemish region will tend more towards the output roles ‘policy’ and ‘control’ (H1a) and less towards the input role ‘representation’ (H1b) than councillors from the other regions.’*

A second place-bound predictor could be the ‘scale’ of local government in terms of the municipal population number. Urbanization, albeit its longstanding historical roots, is considered to be one of the most influential evolutions in the overarching local government context during the last fifty years (Denters & Rose, 2005). Based on an efficiency-driven and output oriented logic a gulf of amalgamations has swept the European continent (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a). In Belgium the last round of amalgamations goes back to 1976-1982, reducing the number of municipalities from 2.586 to its current number of 589 (Plees, 2005). However, whereas urbanization may enhance the output legitimacy of local government, it threatens to weaken its input legitimacy alike¹¹. A larger scale could enlarge the distance between citizens and politicians, meanwhile multiplying the local interests which councillors ought to represent¹². Smaller municipalities, on the other hand, could just facilitate representation (and its particular casework) on the input side through informal and personal contacts between citizens and politicians. Simultaneously, councillors from smaller municipalities could be less preoccupied with the strategic output roles. We therefore hypothesize that:

- *‘Councillors from bigger municipalities will tend more towards the output roles ‘policy’ and ‘control’ (H2a) but less towards the input role ‘representation’ (H2b) than councillors from smaller municipalities.’*

4.5.2. Personal characteristics

Apart from socio-economic and political trends on the macro-level of the political system, evolutions on the micro-level – meeting the increasing participatory and instrumental demands of citizens – could also impact upon councillors’ role orientation in governance (Denters & Rose, 2005).

For instance, reforms introducing (elements of) direct democracy (e.g. local referenda, public meetings, neighbourhood councils, etc.) sought to re-engage citizens in the political process, hence particularly aimed at strengthening the input legitimacy of local governance (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a). Yet on the downside, directly empowering citizens as political actors the political system might impinge on the representative input

¹¹ Moreover, it is expected that particularly in bigger cities the stress on local councillors deems to make the municipal council a fragment of local democracy in general (Haus et al., 2005).

¹² In this respect, we also notice that the total number of local councillors in a municipality does not follow the municipal size in a linear way.

function of the local councillors as intermediate agents between the citizens and the state¹³. Councillors' support for citizen participation (*'participation'*) therefore serves as third predictor in our model. We expect that:

- *'Councillors who support citizen participation will tend less towards the input role 'representation' than councillors who support citizen participation to a lesser extent (H3).'*

Furthermore, citizens' instrumental demands for efficiency on the output side of local governance has led to the introduction of New Public Management-arrangements (planning, benchmarking, PPS, etc.) and other networks (e.g. inter-municipal co-operations), meanwhile increasing the workload for the councillors (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a; Denters & Rose, 2005). Taken together, these trends and their inherent requirement for technical skills and expertise resulted in the professionalization of the local councillor office (Cotta & Best, 2000). In such a context, the concept refers to the increasing calibre of councillors that empowers them as actors in governance¹⁴. Accordingly, the traditional qualities of representative politicians (i.e. the voluntary base of the political involvement, the legal equality of the councillors and the amateur statute) have lost their ground, and a new type of councillor has emerged – perceiving his/her mandate as a career or profession (Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). *'Professionalization'* is our fourth predictor in the analysis. We consider highly educated councillors, experienced councillors and councillors who have a selective *talking or brokerage* profession as *professionalized* councillors¹⁵. We hypothesize that:

- *'Professionalized councillors will tend more towards the output roles 'policy' and 'control' than less professionalized councillors (H4).'*

4.5.3. *Informal decision-making culture*

Despite the plausible and universal influence of the abovementioned evolutions in the environment of the political system, we should also consider the singularity of Belgian informal politics in our analysis. Indeed, the Belgian political system is marked by its informal way of decision-making, operating as an *informal rule of the game*.

¹³ An opposite, more positive, hypothesis could seem plausible too: councillors might perceive citizen participation as an element of democratic behaviour, hence embrace it as a useful complement to their representative role.

¹⁴ The complementary meaning of *professionalization* refers to the growing impact of political parties in councillors' recruitment process and career development (see also *Chapter 3*).

¹⁵ The *talking or brokerage professions* denote certain professions that facilitate political office since they involve negotiating, speaking in public, etc. (e.g. teachers, lawyers) (Norris & Lovenduski, 1993).

A first particular characteristic would be the influence of political parties that are “*at the centre of the councillors’ assumptive world*” (Copus, 2008: 602) without having a formal role-specification in local government legislation (De Rynck, 2000). As such, parties function as *formalized informalities* (Copus, 2008). Political parties may enhance the democratic calibre of a system by harmonizing policy with public demand and acting as intermediary institutions between citizens and the state (Putnam, 1976). However, the exceeding collusion of parties and government may transform representative democracies into “*partitocracies*” or party governments (De Winter & Dumont, 2006: 957). Belgium is widely considered to be such a partitocracy (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). Stringent party discipline can diminish the political debate if majority parties unilaterally take all important decisions (Steyvers et al., 2010). Controlling the local policy, on the other hand, could then turn into a prerequisite for the opposition as members of the political majority will find it very hard to (publicly) march against the party orders. This majority logic leads us to include councillors’ ‘position’ (i.e. belonging to the majority or opposition) as a fifth predictor in the analysis. We presume that:

- ‘*Councillors from the majority will tend more towards ‘representation’ and, above all, ‘policy’ (H5a) but less towards ‘control’ (H5b) than councillors from the opposition.*’

A second distinctive feature of Belgian politics is the dominance of the executive body over the legislative pendant (Steyvers et al., 2010). Formally, the council instigates the executive (the Board of Mayor and Aldermen, BMA). The latter operates as a collegial body whilst its members retain their seat in the council (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). As such, the BMA should merely implement the council decisions. In reality, however, this *personal monism* works the other way around (Steen & Wille, 2005). Whilst the BMA develops its own dynamics as a separate political body (i.e. *functional dualism*), the power-relation between council and executive is inverted (i.e. *reversed monism*). The executive then often functions as the dominant decision-making body, surpassing or bypassing the council at large (Steyvers et al., 2010). Consequently, councillors’ function or ‘*mandate*’ (i.e. having experience in the BMA or not) is the final predictor in the analysis¹⁶. We assume that:

- ‘*Executive councillors will tend more towards ‘representation’ and, above all, ‘policy’ (H6a) but less towards control (H6b) than non-executive councillors.*’

¹⁶ We consider the councillors who held an executive mandate beforehand as *executive* as well. In fact, their experience in the BMA (and inherent calibre) is very likely to colour their role in the council, particularly in comparison with the *ordinary* councillors who do not have such executive experience.

4.6. THE INFORMAL DECISION-MAKING CULTURE MATTERS!

Belgian local councillors are thus confronted with several evolutions in, and characteristics of the local government system in which they function. We have selected eight factors on the theoretical basis outlined above to predict the scores on the different councillor roles (representation, policy, control) by means of a binary logistic regression analysis¹⁷. All variables have been re-coded in dummies (i.e. assuming the value 0 or 1) in order to capture maximal variance from a theoretical perspective. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 4.2. Data reflect the strength (Exp B) and the significance (S) of the association between high scores on the predictors on one hand and high scores on role attitude, behaviour and discrepancy (in terms of representation, policy and control) on the other. The total predictive value of the model is shown by the Nagelkerke R² scores.

¹⁷ 'Flanders' represents councillors from a municipality in the Flemish region and is constructed by the authors based on the respondents' municipality (N=565 or 66.5%); 'Populous' represents the third of respondents of the biggest municipalities in terms of inhabitants, i.e. >19.357, created by the authors based on the respondents' municipality (N=284 or 33.7%); 'Support' represents respondents who gave a score >2 (scale 0-4) on the question '*People have different ideas about how local democracy should function. Please indicate how important for local democracy you feel the following requirements are: Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions.*' (N=354 or 42.3%); 'Talking/brokerage' represents the professional categories Professional politician, Civil servant, Business manager, Teacher and Liberal profession (N=439 or 52%); 'University' represents respondents with University/college or equivalent as highest completed education (N=543 or 64.3%); 'Experienced' represents the third of respondents with most experience as councillors, i.e. >13 years (N=285 or 33.6%); 'Majority' presents respondents who are member of a party of the political majority in the council, created by the authors based on the comparison of the respondents' political party and the political majority in the municipality (N=518 or 63.7%); 'BMA' represents respondents who presently hold or previously held a mandate as a Member of the executive board (N=277 or 33.3%). The dependent variables represent respondents who gave a score >2 on the question on 'role attitude' (For Representation N=745 or 88.3%; For Policy N=651 or 77.9%; For Control N=673 or 80.2%) and 'role behaviour' (For Representation N=558 or 66.3%; For Policy N=330 or 39.2%; For Control N=442 or 52.2%); and respondents with a score >1 on the newly created variable 'role discrepancy' (For Representation N=98 or 11.8%; For Policy N=225 or 27.2%; For Control N=129 or 15.5%).

Table 4.2. Role attitude, behaviour and discrepancy of Belgian local councillors: results of a binary logistic regression analysis

Place	Region	Attitude			Behaviour			Discrepancy		
		Represent.	Policy	Control	Represent.	Policy	Control	Represent.	Policy	Control
		Exp B (S)	Exp B (S)	Exp B (S)	Exp B (S)	Exp B (S)	Exp B (S)	Exp B (S)	Exp B (S)	Exp B (S)
Personal charact.	Flanders	1.03 (.92)	<u>1.48 (.04)</u>	<u>1.74 (.01)</u>	1.16 (.41)	.84 (.36)	1.09 (.63)	1.01 (.99)	<u>1.77 (.01)</u>	1.08 (.74)
	Scale									
	Populous	1.09 (.72)	.89 (.52)	1.17 (.44)	.92 (.63)	.92 (.65)	1.09 (.60)	1.04 (.89)	.77 (.17)	.69 (.11)
	Participation									
Profession	Support	1.12 (.64)	1.20 (.32)	1.31 (.18)	<u>1.43 (.03)</u>	1.45 (.05)	1.17 (.33)	1.32 (.25)	1.11 (.58)	1.14 (.55)
	Talk./brok.	.82 (.42)	.77 (.18)	1.11 (.60)	.85 (.34)	1.00 (.99)	1.14 (.42)	1.05 (.84)	1.01 (.95)	1.26 (.29)
	Education									
	University	1.24 (.39)	1.08 (.70)	1.27 (.25)	.97 (.85)	.91 (.62)	<u>1.81 (.00)</u>	1.32 (.30)	1.12 (.58)	.92 (.71)
Informal decision-making culture	Experience									
	Experienced	1.64 (.07)	1.46 (.08)	<u>1.93 (.01)</u>	1.41 (.08)	1.29 (.23)	<u>1.46 (.04)</u>	.65 (.16)	.88 (.57)	.70 (.19)
	Position									
	Majority	1.31 (.28)	<u>1.51 (.03)</u>	<u>.42 (.00)</u>	<u>1.91 (.00)</u>	<u>5.80 (.00)</u>	1.07 (.70)	<u>.52 (.01)</u>	<u>.28 (.00)</u>	<u>.47 (.00)</u>
Mandate	Mandate									
	Executive	<u>.56 (.04)</u>	1.10 (.68)	1.04 (.88)	<u>1.94 (.00)</u>	<u>5.78 (.00)</u>	<u>3.35 (.00)</u>	<u>.39 (.01)</u>	<u>.27 (.00)</u>	<u>.26 (.00)</u>
Nagelkerke R ²		<u>.02 (.52)</u>	<u>.04 (.03)</u>	<u>.08 (.00)</u>	<u>.09 (.00)</u>	<u>.38 (.00)</u>	<u>.15 (.00)</u>	<u>.09 (.00)</u>	<u>.23 (.00)</u>	<u>.13 (.00)</u>

(Significant results: $p < .05$)

First we consider councillors' **role attitude**. For all three roles, the predictive value of the total model is rather low. Representation is weakly (and not significantly) predicted by our model of independent variables, whilst the results for policy and control are significant but only faintly stronger. Since the role attitude did not vary that much amongst our research population initially (i.e. most councillors supporting their three roles to a large extent), it seems logical that this role attitude differs to a lesser extent according to evolutions in/and characteristics of Belgian governance as well. Looking at the influence of the predictors per analytical level, 'place' only matters partially. Flemish councillors do pay more importance to the output roles, confirming hypothesis 1a, but value representation as much as councillors from Brussels and Wallonia, rejecting hypothesis 1b. 'Scale' does not matter in any significant manner. Hence, we cannot accept hypotheses 2a and 2b as well. The second level, councillors' 'personal characteristics', matters even less. Only 'experience' impacts significantly upon 'control': experienced councillors endorse their control role almost twice as much as less experienced councillors¹⁸. Yet on the other hand, profession and education have no significant impact. Consequently, we cannot accept hypothesis 4 entirely, nor can we accept hypothesis 3.

Finally, does the 'informal decision-making culture' act upon councillors' role attitude? Hypotheses 5a (partially) and especially 5b can be accepted. Councillors from majority parties attach significantly more importance to the policymaking role than councillors from the opposition. Yet no significant difference occurs in terms of representation. Opposition councillors for their part place more than twice as much emphasis on control. Such pattern intuitively complies with the common notion of checks and balances in the local authority. Hypotheses 6a and 6b, however, cannot be confirmed. Executive councillors attach substantially less importance to representation than non-executives. The *ordinary* councillors, who have no experience in the executive board, mainly endorse a role representing local issues and problems in the local authority. No significant results emerge concerning the output roles. In sum, the informal decision-making culture thus matters most in explaining councillors' role attitude, albeit the influence of these informal rules of the game is not very strong and significant.

Second, do these findings apply to councillors' **role behaviour** as well? Considering the democratic deficit revealed in the descriptive analysis of councillors' role behaviour, the stronger and significant results produced by the explanatory models as such seem legitimate. Representation, policy and control are moderately/strongly predicted by our model of independent variables. 'Place' first of all does not matter in predicting the role

¹⁸ Moreover, if we would have applied the same (more detailed) significance levels as in the other regression analyses in the study (see *Chapter 3* and *Chapter 5*), we could also conclude that experienced councillors are more likely do endorse the other facets of their role-set (i.e. representation and policy).

behaviour of Belgian local councillors. Hypotheses 1a, 1b, 2a and 2b are thus rejected. The second level of analysis, i.e. councillors' 'personal characteristics', offers more explanatory value. Contrary to the expectation phrased in hypothesis 3, councillors who support direct citizen participation do not contribute less to representing the local requests and issues in the political system themselves. Rather, they (claim to) exhibit more representative behaviour¹⁹. Accordingly, an open mind to active citizen input in the local authority seems to align with strong representative behaviour, rather than being antipodal to it. Further, highly educated and experienced (and thus professionalized) councillors contribute significantly more to controlling the municipal policy as we expected. As the other expected relations (regarding the policy role and councillors' profession as a determinant of role orientation) are neither strong nor significant, however, we cannot accept hypothesis 4 entirely²⁰.

Third, the table clearly demonstrates that the impact of both place and personal characteristics is outweighed by the impact of the 'informal decision-making culture'. Councillors from the political majority and councillors with executive experience indicate to contribute far more to representation and policymaking than non-executives and opposition councillors. Hypotheses 5a and 6a are consequently confirmed entirely. Furthermore, whilst councillors' 'position' does not affect control significantly, rejecting hypothesis 5b, executives also contribute substantially more to controlling local policy than non-executives. This result leads us to reject hypothesis 6b. Obviously, such a pattern does not fit with the general notion of checks and balances in the local authority anymore. As such, it is mainly the typical decision-making culture of Belgian local politics that predicts local councillors' role behaviour. Two formalized informalities, cutting across both democratic principles and legal prescriptions, determine councillors' role behaviour and provoke a democratic deficit in councillors' functioning.

Finally, which factors account for the second democratic deficit, i.e. the **role discrepancy** that has emerged from the empirical comparison between principal attitude and practical behaviour? The table shows that all three models are (moderately) strong and significant. Policy thereby exceeds control and representation in terms of the proportion of variance in councillors' role orientation accounted for. The analysis per analytical level shows only one significant result on the macro-level 'place'. Flemish councillors feel a stronger discrepancy in their policymaking role than councillors from Brussels and Wallonia.

¹⁹ And, from a wider statistical perspective, they also contribute more to the definition of general policy goals in the political system.

²⁰ From a wider statistical perspective, we can also conclude that experienced councillors contribute more to representing local requests and issues in the political system. This suggests that the awareness of what it takes to be a good councillor, as well as the practical implementation of this awareness, might develop over time.

Hence, the outward-oriented conception of the mandate of the Flemish councillors does not lead them to exert a stronger impact in the domain of policymaking in practice too.

On the micro-level, the significant relations found in the analyses of councillors' role attitude and role behaviour evaporate in the analysis of councillors' role discrepancy. 'Personal characteristics' do not seem to determine whether councillors face a discrepancy between principle and practice. It is above all the 'informal decision-making culture' that appears to be the determining factor again. Both 'position' and 'mandate' significantly and substantially determine if councillors experience a substantial discrepancy between their role attitude and role behaviour in terms of representation, policy, and control. The gap between the importance attached to representation and the extent to which this role is fulfilled in practice, is clearly less felt by councillors from the majority and especially councillors with executive experience compared to non-executives and opposition members. This implies that the discrepancy between role attitude and role behaviour is more than twice as strong for *ordinary* councillors. Furthermore, the role-discrepancy in the policymaking role is much smaller for executives and majority councillors as well, whilst the analysis for control produces similar results. Thus, executives and councillors from the majority are without a doubt less subjected to the democratic deficit than their colleagues. They seem empowered to act in line with the legal provisions and their personal beliefs, i.e. as the foundation of local democracy. Besides, results for 'mandate' are even stronger than results for 'position'. This implies that these factors probably enhance each other²¹. Majority councillors and particularly councillors with executive experience form a specific elite which is able to play its role to the detriment of the other councillors²².

Table 4.3 summarizes the total predictive value of the independent variables in our regression analysis. A quick glance at the table immediately indicates which factors provoke the democratic deficit in local councillors' role-fulfilment. Both 'place' (3/18 significant relations, ratio 1:6) and especially the 'personal characteristics' of the councillors (4/36 significant relations, ratio 1:9) do not really seem to matter systematically. The 'informal decision-making culture' (14/18 significant relations, ratio 1:1.3), on the other hand, does exert a systematic influence upon councillors' role orientation. Consequently, we would argue that it is above all the typical Belgian

²¹ Formally, the executives are elected by the council. Yet in practice the majority parties distribute the executive mandates. As such, the executives-in-place are almost always member of a majority party.

²² In Appendix D, we present two additional analyses to underscore this supremacy. First, we show that councillors with executive experience and, above all, councillors from the majority have a more positive opinion on the effectiveness of the councillor instruments in office, as well as the information they receive from the municipal administration. Second, we underline that councillors with experience in the executive board also tend to have (or had) a stronger position in their party on the local and supra-local level.

informal decision-making culture that determines local councillors' functioning and the democratic deficit within. The research hypotheses are summarized in Box 4.1.

Table 4.3. Councillors' role orientation: strength of the individual predictors

Predictor	Analytical Level	Significant relations [X/9]
Majority Logic	Informal decision-making culture	7
Mandate	Informal decision-making culture	7
Region	Place	3
Experience	Personal characteristics	2
Education	Personal characteristics	1
Participation	Personal characteristics	1
Profession	Personal characteristics	0
Scale	Place	0

Box 4.1. Role attitude and behaviour: overview of the research hypotheses

Hypothesis	Attitude	Behaviour
<u>Place</u>		
H1a Flanders more policy/control	✓/✓	⊗
H1b Flanders less representation	⊗	⊗
H2a Big size more policy/control	⊗/⊗	⊗
H2b Big size less representation	⊗	⊗
<u>Personal characteristics</u>		
H3 Support citizen participation less representation	⊗	✗
H4 Professionalization more policy/control	⊗/(✓)	⊗/✓
<u>Informal decision-making culture</u>		
H5a Majority more representation/policy	⊗/✓	✓/✓
H5b Majority less control	✓	⊗
H6a Executives more representation/policy	✗/⊗	✓/✓
H6b Executives less control	⊗	✗

(✓: hypothesis confirmed, ⊗: no significant result, ✗: hypothesis reversed)

4.7. CONCLUSION

This chapter was inspired by the claim that local councillors find it increasingly hard to function in their role as the foundation of local democracy in the complex local governance context of the twenty-first century. In Belgium local councillors are conceived as the emanation of representative democracy. Hence their classic role-set of representation, policy and control should empower them as key actors in local government and local governance. And even if councillors' role fulfilment has been questioned beforehand as well, it is often argued that the shift to governance further threatens to make councillors mere fragments of local democracy, failing to fulfil their typical role-set (even more).

Our study has designated that at least in terms of role *attitude* Belgian local councillors still correspond to the theoretical and legal demands of the political system. Councillors pay significant importance to the classic roles policy, control and especially representation. We did perceive a democratic deficit in their role *behaviour*, however. Belgian councillors seem to contribute far less to this role-set in practice than they are expected to. Furthermore, the comparison between the role attitude and role behaviour has resulted in a significant *discrepancy*. As such, the democratic deficit seems twofold: councillors' role behaviour deviates from the theoretical and legal provisions, as well as from their personal role attitudes. In our view, attention should be directed at the underlying causes of these deficits if councillors ought to be re-empowered in an effective way.

Therefore, a regression analysis aimed at exposing the factors that determine local councillors' role-fulfilment, and consequently the democratic deficits within. Whereas place and personal councillor characteristics did not seemed to matter strongly or systematically, the typical informal decision-making culture of the Belgian local system did substantially. The executive dominance (as proof of the *reversed monism*) and the power of political parties – two formalized informalities or *informal rules of the game* – overwrite both democratic theory and councillors' personal role attitudes with a strong political ink. On one hand, a selective group of councillors obtains power to act as the *foundation* of local democracy, defining and controlling policy whilst representing requests and issues from society. On the other hand, *ordinary* councillors seem to be reduced to mere fellow travellers, if not *fragments* of democracy in this system. As such, the democratic deficit is mainly due to factors that contradict the ideal and formal notion of democratic governance.

Based on these empirical findings, what perspectives for the future could be raised²³? If Belgian local councillors are to be re-empowered as a democratic foundation, further

²³ These perspectives are further elaborated in the conclusive chapter of this study (*Chapter 7*).

local government reforms seem inevitable. Literature distinguishes two paths to tackle this problem (Hendriks, 2002; De Rynck, 2007). The first turns to traditional institutional reforms, strengthening representative democracy and its actors. We could doubt, however, if the current path chosen by Belgian regional governments would be sufficient to achieve this goal. Not only do councillors seem far from re-empowered at this moment, we expect the effects of the implemented structural reforms to be insufficient to cope with the dominant influence of the informal culture over an extended period of time as well.

The introduction of *dualism* could be part of the solution, as this system has proven to be quite effective in the Netherlands (De Groot, 2009). In this way, executive powers would be formally transferred to the executive body made up of (semi-) professionals who no longer participate in normal council work. Ordinary councillors, on the other hand, could focus more on their core-tasks. This personal and functional separation partly fits with the present reality. Indeed, the persisted prevalence of the layman rule no longer seems in harmony with the reality of diverging local mandates. The latter reflects a strong dichotomy between ordinary powerless councillors and a local powerful elite. However, whilst dualism could counter the executive dominance, it might not be sufficient to overturn the partitocratic nature of the Belgian local government system.

The alternative path advocates a new role for local councillors adapted to the new context of local governance: the role of *metagovernor*. This role implies linking governance networks to representative government and is considered the optimal way to ensure the democratic legitimacy as well as the effectiveness of network decision-making (Hovik & Vabo, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). In a nutshell, councillors act as managers of democracy in those networks instead of being the cornerstone of the latter (Sørensen, 2006). Accordingly, councillors no longer act as key actors in the process of governance by means of their traditional roles, but facilitate and safeguard its democratic proceeding on the base of their electoral legitimacy.

However, some problems with this concept might still exist. First, most metagovernance theories and studies seem to be inspired by a normative underpinning whilst systematic empirical research is yet to catch on. Hence it is difficult to predict the viability of this role in the Belgian context. Second, metagovernance seems a predominant North-European (and especially Scandinavian) phenomenon. Since governance authors point to the institutional context as a fundamental precondition for metagovernance (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Wälti et al., 2004; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009), we could doubt if this concept complies with the typical Belgian setting. In fact, Belgian legislation still strongly emphasizes its preference for traditional local government and the inherent councillor role-set. Third, our descriptive analysis has revealed that councillors largely support their own classic role-set. It is first and foremost the informal decision-making

culture that instigates the democratic deficit in councillors' role-fulfilment. Hence, it is doubtful whether councillors would be willing to exchange their *political primacy* for a new role as metagovernor. Finally, even in the changing context of governance traditional government and its institutions are hardly to become obsolete: "*traditional government structures are still very much present, and in many instances, government seems to be a more appropriate concept than governance*" (Jacobsen, 2009: 237). Within the course of traditional government, the classic councillor role-set could then be more suitable than the new metagovernor role.

Therefore, follow-up research is needed to further our insights in the effects of government reforms, and to map out and evaluate the optimal path to establish democratic governance. Nonetheless for the time being it is apparent that we can hardly concur that Belgian local councillors function as the foundation of local democracy.

CHAPTER 5

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

A SURVEY ANALYSIS OF COUNCILLOR ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR IN BELGIUM¹

Abstract

Recent evolutions in Western societies have sparked renewed interest in the study of political representation. Academics particularly stress the need to develop a modern understanding of the concept that acknowledges its dynamic nature. This chapter aims for such an approach in the context of Belgian local governance. Drawing on a multifaceted typology developed by Andeweg and Thomassen (2005), it empirically outlines the notions of 856 local councillors on political representation at the attitudinal and behavioural level. Furthermore, it searches to explain variation in the latter according to councillors' political and personal profile, contact pattern and the local government context. The chapter paints a balanced picture. The largest group of councillors pays equal importance to authorization, accountability, delegation and responsiveness as basic styles or modes of political representation. Nevertheless, we perceive a clear shift from councillors' attitudes, in which delegation takes the upper hand, to their acclaimed behaviour, which becomes more entrepreneurial as hypothesized. Furthermore, councillors' personal profile and contact pattern seem the most important determinants of political representation.

Key Words

Political representation, local councillors, attitudes, behaviour, Belgium

¹ This chapter is based on an article co-authored by Prof. dr. Herwig Reynaert, Prof. dr. Kristof Steyvers and Prof. dr. Filip De Rynck. It has been submitted to *Acta Politica* and is currently under review.

5.1. INTRODUCTION

Political representation is often considered to be an important touchstone for the quality of democracy (Eulau et al., 1959; Urbinati & Warren, 2008; Vieira & Runciman, 2008). In fact, since legitimate and democratic government requires at least some congruence between public policy and citizen demands, a central question asks how politicians should act to obtain the latter (Rao, 1998). Answers are sought by studying councillors' representative style, or "*the particular criterion of judgement the representative ought to use in deciding on legislative issues*" (Rao, 1998: 30)². The goal of this chapter is to investigate the latter in the context of Belgian local governance. It tackles three basic questions: (a) 'How do local councillors envisage their representative role?'; (b) 'Do they claim to behave accordingly?'; and (c) 'Which factors determine (the variation in) councillors' representative style?'

It is remarkable how recent evolutions in Western societies (e.g. differentiated political decision-making, growing power of executives and unaccountable bodies, fading political trust, declining electoral turnout) have sparked concern on the current state of political representation (Urbinati & Warren, 2008; Saward, 2010; Alonso et al., 2011). Also Hannah Pitkin (2004: 339), arguably one of the most influential academics in the field, takes a gloomy view on the subject:

"Our governors have become a self-perpetuating elite that rules – or rather, administers – passive or privatized masses of people. The representatives act not as agents of the people but simply instead of them. We send them to take care of public affairs like hired experts, and they are professionals, entrenched in office and party structures (...) and insulated from the ordinary realities of their constituents' lives (...)."

Although Pitkin's claim refers to national politics in the United States, we could draw some clear parallels with local politics in Europe. Local government, traditionally shaped by an electoral chain of command from citizens to politicians (Dearlove, 1973), is often criticized for its exclusive character, lack of accountability and transparency too. These criticisms are epitomized by the metaphorical *gap* between citizens and politics (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000). It includes, amongst others, declining levels of electoral turnout and

² In addition to the question *how* councillors should represent the people, a complementary classic question asks *who* they should represent. This question is captured by the concept *representative focus* (Rao, 1998). Formally and theoretically, Belgian local councillors are expected to act as the representative of the local community at large. Appendix E presents an overview of councillors' opinion on this subject. It confirms that almost every councillor wishes to represent his or her entire municipality in office. Additionally, councillors also consider themselves as the advocates of (several) subgroups of the local community (e.g. workers, less resourceful citizens, a particular geographical area of the municipality, the middle class, etc.).

party membership, fading political interest and trust (Borraz & John, 2004; Bogason & Musso, 2006; Franzke et al., 2007). Besides, the introduction of New Public Management-arrangements in combination with an increased task package and corresponding workload has added further to the pressure on local representatives. One of the paramount effects of these evolutions is the professionalization of the councillor office (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008). Arguably, professionalized councillors might further enhance the gap between citizens and the political system by behaving more autonomously from their constituents (Petracca, 1991; Herrick, 2011).

Yet likewise, it is argued that the typical qualities of local government facilitate political representation at the grassroots. For instance, a lower threshold renders local government the most accessible arena of the political sphere, either actively (by assuming a political mandate) or passively (by participating in policy-making via other channels) (Phillips, 1996; Pitkin, 2004; Pratchett, 2004). Additionally, local government allows to adjust public policy better to specific local needs, for policy is shaped by actors who tend to have a direct stake in it (Stoker, 1996). And perhaps most importantly, the close geographical distance between citizens and politicians at the local level promotes personal contacts, hence better representation and higher levels of political trust (Rao, 1998; Judge, 1999). Based on the above surplus, and in response to fading political trust and citizen emancipation, Steyvers et al. (2007: 18) take a rather optimistic stance on political representation³:

“Representation thus no longer equals enlightened judgement, shared social interest or party mandate. The current state of representation might actually come closest to delegation, and this is also true at the local level. In this scenario representatives act because of clear guidance and instructions conveying the views of those they represent, thus leaving more room for popular participation and even direct rule by the people.”

Still, we must also bear in mind the changed context in which political representation at the local level takes place nowadays. In fact, local government has become increasingly entrenched in local governance, which is defined as a “polycentric system in which a variety of actors are engaged in local public decision-making processes” (Denters, 2011: 313). This new context might affect representation in several ways. In governance, the policy arena is extended with new actors and processes but simultaneously, linkages within are intensified. Since governance has increased the need for strategic decision-making and long-term planning, its accountability has been questioned in terms of a closed, technocratic or elitist character of decision-making (Wälti et al., 2004;

³ The authors argue that such modern representation evolves in interaction with citizen participation.

Papadopoulos, 2007). On the other hand, some argue that governance might reinvigorate democratic representation exactly because representatives also have to engage with citizens and local stakeholders in the course of policy-making (Klijn & Skelcher, 2007).

In the literature, most of the empirical studies have focused on the representative style of political leaders in local governance hitherto. Haus and Sweeting (2006b), for instance, have shown how European mayors prefer a moderated style of political representation which holds the balance between outright trusteeship, pure delegation and direct citizen participation. Belgian mayors, albeit playing an entrepreneurial role in specific governance networks (De Rynck & Voets, 2006; Block & Steyvers, 2011), correspond to this general picture as well (Steyvers et al., 2006). Furthermore, John and Cole (1999) demonstrated that the representative style of mayors is contingent on the interplay between institutional structures, party organization and political culture.

However in contrast with such profuse attention for political leadership, few studies have empirically substantiated the classic debate on political representation at the local base office in the context of modern governance. An exception can be found in the Spanish context, where Brugué and Vallès (2005) have underscored a growing degree of the entrepreneurial style amongst local councillors. In Belgian literature, such empirical insights are not yet available. This is why our chapter attempts to fill this gap. First, it provides an overview of the research methods and data (*Section 5.2*) before elaborating on the analytical framework and operationalization we use to study political representation (*Sections 5.3 and 5.4*). The following section discusses the contextual setting of the Belgian research (*Section 5.5*). Thereafter, the descriptive and explanatory sections analyze councillors' attitudes and behaviour in terms of political representation (*Section 5.6 and 5.7*). Finally, the conclusion (*Section 5.8*) summarizes our findings and connects them to the theoretical debate on political representation in local governance.

5.2. RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

Our goal is to examine political representation in Belgian local governance, focussing on the representative style of its councillors. To this end we have combined descriptive research questions with an explanatory agenda. The former research questions outline councillors' attitudes towards representation and the perception they have of their behaviour in office. The latter agenda seeks to explain variation in these attitudes and behaviour according to the political, relational, personal and contextual profile of the research population. By doing so, we apply a multifaceted typology on political representation established by Andeweg and Thomassen (2005; see also Andeweg, 2003).

This empirical approach has been made possible by the quantitative method of data collection. The chapter draws on survey data collected from Belgian local councillors as part of the European research project *Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance*, conducted in 2008. In 180 municipalities, an anonymous and standard postal questionnaire was sent to all the councillors, the aldermen and the mayor. The aldermen and mayors were included since they retain their council seats in the Belgian monistic local government tradition. The 180 municipalities were randomly selected from a total of 589 Belgian municipalities, which were stratified in terms of municipal size, region and socio-economic profile. After two follow-ups, a research population of 856 cases (equalling 21%) was obtained⁴. In addition to questions on political representation, the survey required information on the councillors' personal characteristics, political careers, their (attitude towards) local democracy and their municipal settings.

Throughout the analyses we have been careful to consider our results as *role orientations*, i.e. concerning the very personal opinions of the respondents expressed as attitudes and behaviour. Such orientations obviously hold a certain degree of subjectivity. Nevertheless, they form a key to understanding (and modelling) concrete behaviour in office (Cooper & Richardson, 2006; De Groot et al., 2010).

5.3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: A MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Probably the single most *uncontested* fact on representation is its multifarious meaning (Vieira & Runciman, 2008). In the context of political studies, representation is concerned with the relation between citizens/constituents (i.e. the *represented*) and politicians/legislators (i.e. the *representatives*) (Eulau et al., 1959; Jewell, 1983). More specifically, political representation is meant to establish a reliable and effective link between politics, citizens and society (Heywood, 2002). Hence, we define political representation as the “*relation between two persons, the representative and the represented or constituent, with the representative holding the authority to perform various actions that incorporate the agreement of the represented*” (de Grazia quoted in Rao, 1998: 20)⁵.

The traditional orthodoxy of scrutinizing this relation goes back to the *mandate-independence controversy* (Fairlie, 1940; Pitkin, 1967), operationalized by Eulau and his

⁴ Although this response rate is rather low, the research population represents the population of Belgian local councillors in terms of the socio-economic character of the municipality whilst it is nearly representative in terms of municipal size and region.

⁵ Some contemporary approaches disconnect political representation from this normative loading, focussing on representation outside common frameworks of legitimacy (Rehfeld, 2006; Saward, 2010).

colleagues (1959). It revolves around a fundamental dichotomization. Should representatives act as *delegates*, instructed and bound by a mandate from society (i.e. the *Madisonian view*)? Or should they govern independently as *trustees*, relying on free, independent and mature judgement (i.e. the *Burkean view*)? Amid this continuum, Eulau and his colleagues (1959) have placed the *politicos*, who adjust their behaviour to the circumstances in place and/or fluctuate between trustees and delegates. Later, this typology was complemented with the *partisans*. Indeed in Western parliamentary democracies, there is little doubt that political parties function as basic units of political representation (Birch, 1971; Rao, 1998; Andeweg, 2003; Copus, 2004).

Our survey includes a question that incorporates this classic orthodoxy. It is phrased as follows: “*How should members of the council vote if there should be a conflict of interests between the own conviction, the opinion of the party group and the opinion of the voters?*” Respondents were asked to choose one of three options, identifying themselves as *trustee*, *partisan* or *delegate*. As Table 5.1 shows, most respondents claim that the party line should be councillors’ main directive in the case of a conflict of opinion⁶. Furthermore, the majority of councillors who would vote against the party whip think that they should follow their personal opinion then. Hence, only a small minority of the Belgian local councillors qualify as true delegates in the classic conception of the term.

Table 5.1. Classic orthodoxy on representative style

How should a member of the council vote if there should be a conflict of opinion?	%
According to his/her <i>own</i> conviction	42.0
According to the opinion of the <i>party</i> group	48.8
According to the opinion of the <i>voters</i>	9.2

(N=822)

However, this classic orthodoxy poses some problems on how to interpret political representation as it unfolds in practice. For instance, councillors’ voting behaviour in the council is often just the crystallized result of a much more informal process of negotiation, bargaining and alliance-seeking that takes place behind the council scene, in the party sphere or elsewhere (Thomassen & Esaiasson, 2006). Further in modern

⁶ As such, the classic orthodoxy further underscores the party discipline in the Belgian councils.

societies, the pure paternalistic Burkean notion of representation is deemed outdated and even undesirable (Judge, 1999; Vieira & Runciman, 2008). Pure delegation, on the other hand, is difficult to achieve in practice. It requires the existence of clear instructions and relations between citizens and politicians, as well as the belief that the latter ought to strictly obey these instructions (McCrone & Kuklinski, 1979). When stretched to the extremes, both ends of the continuum even fail to be representation any longer (Pitkin, 1967; Jewell, 1983). A final critique is empirical. Often, politicians are neither pure trustees nor delegates, or classify themselves as politico (Cavanagh, 1982; Cooper & Richardson, 2006). Hence, Jewell (1983: 312) argues that “*the more thoroughly representative roles are explored, the more complex the relationships become and the less useful it seems to simply classify legislators in terms of the traditional trustee-politico-delegate categories.*” The classic orthodoxy might therefore “*fail to capture the complexity of the representative process in the empirical world*” (Cavanagh, 1982: 127).

Nowadays, academics agree that accounts of political representation should envisage the relation between citizens and politicians as a dynamic and functional process (Cavanagh, 1982; Andeweg, 2003; Saward, 2010; Alonso et al., 2011). For Pitkin (1967), a representative should act on behalf of the people, in the interest of the people, and according to the wishes of the people. As such, representation encapsulates a delicate balance between discretion *and* liability. It unfolds once citizens authorize representatives to act on their behalf. Throughout the process these representatives remain accountable whilst afterwards, the results of the process should reflect citizens’ interests (Rehfeld, 2006; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). In sum, political representation entails authorization, accountability and responsiveness (Beetham, 1996)⁷.

Our analytical framework should thus conceive of political representation as a dynamic and reciprocal process between the represented, who authorize and instruct, and the representatives, who act responsively and accountably (Pratchett & Wilson, 1996; Andeweg, 2003; Parkinson, 2003; Vieira & Runciman, 2008). Benz and Papadopoulos (2006) contend in this respect that legitimate and democratic governance requires a circular relationship between citizens and representatives.

We have found a theoretical and analytical framework that encompasses these different conditions in the work of Andeweg and Thomassen (2005; see also Andeweg, 2003). The framework is based upon two interlocked dimensions of the representative relation between citizens and politicians. The first dimension is the *direction* of the representative relation (see also John & Cole, 1999; Brugué & Vallès, 2005). Representation ‘from

⁷ Beetham adds representativeness as the fourth criterion of democratic representation. Since our research question concerns the substantive side of political representation, however, this descriptive aspect is not considered in the chapter. For a descriptive analysis of political representation in Belgian local government, see Reynaert et al., 2006 and Verhelst et al., *forthcoming*.

below’ adopts a popular perspective, since the relation starts from the perspective of the citizens who have and express clear policy views. The mission of politicians is to convey these views into public policy. Representation ‘from above’ takes a more elitist stance. Representatives – either individually or organized in political parties – instigate the relation by presenting (and seeking support for) their own views to the citizens. The second dimension of the analytical framework asserts the possibilities for citizens to exert *control* over the representative relation in order to prevent policy outcomes from conflicting with their interests, or preferences (see also Vieira & Runciman, 2008). As such, this dimension captures the reciprocal dynamics of political representation. More particularly, it concerns the “*moment of popular control*” from the citizens on the actions of their representatives (Andeweg, 2003: 153): ‘ex ante’ controls precede on the (actions of the) representative relation, ‘ex post’ controls follow on the latter.

Figure 5.1. Andeweg/Thomassen typology on political representation

		Control	
		<i>Ex Ante</i>	<i>Ex Post</i>
Direction	<i>From Above</i>	Authorization	Accountability
	<i>From Below</i>	Delegation	Responsiveness

(Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005: 512)

The intersection of both dimensions yields a quadruple typology of political representation with four basic modes or styles (see also Figure 5.1):

- *Delegation*: arguably, representation from below and ex ante appeals most to our traditional and idealistic picture of political representation (McCrone & Kuklinski, 1979). The relation starts from citizens who have clear demands and policy views and instruct politicians beforehand (how) to implement them. Nevertheless this mode is complicated and demanding in practice because citizens must have clear preferences whilst the policy agenda should be predictable in order to steer the relation before decisions have to be taken.
- *Responsiveness*: as an ideal-type, representation from below and ex post tends to be driven by the desire to please the constituency or the fear of removal from office. Again, politicians foremost follow citizen views, but prefer popular control after they have taken their decisions. This mode demands that representatives are

able to interpret (changes in) popular preferences in order to act in accordance with these preferences.

- *Authorization*: representation from above and ex ante holds that politicians present their views to the citizens who can exert control on the relation beforehand. This mode is exemplified by the *Responsible Party Model*, according to which parties submit their manifesto to the citizen/voters who grant a mandate which authorizes them to implement its policies.
- *Accountability*: in representation from above and ex post, representatives act as political entrepreneurs who proactively implement decisions whilst citizens pass judgement on them afterwards. Even though Andeweg (2003) admits that this mode is more elitist, he expects it to become the main paradigm in the future. Indeed, the increasing uncertainty about citizens' preferences and the rising importance of political parties foster representation from above. Besides, the growing unpredictability of the political agenda calls for citizen control ex post⁸.

5.4. OPERATIONALIZATION

In their original model, Andeweg and Thomassen (2005: 514-515) measured political representation through the following questions. The first question deals with the representative *direction*, the second concerns the representative *control*:

- “*In their relationship with their voters, politicians may emphasize different aspects. Which of these two aspects do you think is most important?*
(a) translating the political views of citizens into policy as accurately as possible;
(b) seeking support from the voters for the political views of their own party.”
- “*In our political system, elections have various functions. Which of these two functions do you think is most important?*
(a) in elections, politicians account to the voters for their actions in the past;
(b) in elections, politicians put their plans for the future to the voters.”

We operationalized the typology of Andeweg and Thomassen on the basis of four specific items in our survey (see Table 5.2). Yet unlike the original model, we did not ask our respondents to choose the most important item per dimension. Instead, we asked them to rate every item on a scale from 0 (none) to 4 (very great). Furthermore, we asked the respondents to assess the importance of every item, as well as their acclaimed

⁸ Andeweg mentions *Europeanization* as a complementary factor that enforces the other factors.

contribution to it in practice. Whereas the former aspect represents councillors' attitude towards political representation (research question 1), the latter maps out councillors' acclaimed behaviour (research question 2).

Table 5.2. Operationalization of the dimensions of political representation

Dimension	Item	Description
Direction	Item 1	<i>"Implementing the program of my political party/movement"</i> ('program')
	Item 2	<i>"Representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society"</i> ('society')
Control	Item 3	<i>"Explaining decisions of the council to the citizens"</i> ('explanation')
	Item 4	<i>"Publicizing the debate on local issues before decisions are taken"</i> ('debate')

Item 1 and 2 represent the *direction* of the representative relation between citizens and councillors in our typology. Comparing the respondents' scores on both items creates three basic categories for the direction of political representation: from above (program > society), neutral (program = society) and from below (program < society). Item 3 and 4 then represent the way in which citizens (are allowed to) exert *control* on the representative relation. Again, comparing the respondents' scores on the items creates three basic categories for the control on political representation: ex post (explanation > debate), neutral (explanation = debate) and ex ante (explanation < debate). Finally, the combination of the dimensions *direction* and *control* yields a model with nine possible positions: the ideal-types delegation, authorization, accountability and responsiveness, as well as five neutral categories in between (see further *Section 5.6*).

Such operationalization aims at being dynamic and nuanced. First, the items do not confine representation to the elections in which citizens transfer their authority to the politicians. Instead, they focus on representation beyond the electoral arena. Contemporary academic writing agrees on this point: "*elections do not put an end to the representative process*" (Alonso et al., 2011: 6; see also Saward, 2010). In fact, the circular process of representation in practice is moulded by constant communication and information between representatives and represented (Klausen & Sweeting, 2005; Benz & Papadopoulos, 2006). Therefore, our items grasp the way in which politicians claim to represent the locality during their mandate inside the political system day in, day out.

Second, by asking our respondents to rate both items of each dimension, instead of choosing the most important one (as did Andeweg and Thomassen), we created a nuanced account of political representation. This need has been recognized by Andeweg and Thomassen themselves. For instance, councillors might argue that their party program concurs with the most important issues from local society, hence fail to choose between item 1 and item 2. Such councillors would rate representation from above as important as representation from below, hence have a *neutral* opinion. This logic applies to representative control as well. In our model, the different modes of representative direction and control are thus not mutually exclusive⁹. Furthermore, this allows us to test the theoretical claim that legitimate representation encapsulates *both* authorization, accountability, responsiveness *and* delegation. Throughout the analyses, therefore, we interpret our results as nuances/preferences for a representative style, rather than clear-cut antagonisms. Yet before we proceed to these analyses, the following section outlines an important determinant of political representation, namely the contextual setting of our research.

5.5. CONTEXTUAL SETTING AND DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH HYPOTHESES: POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN BELGIAN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

In Belgium the rationale of political representation, and councillors' inherent formal primacy, have always occupied a pivotal position in the local system. The council, which is popularly elected every six years, forms the theoretical base of local democracy (Plees, 2005). It is ideal-typically comprised of layman-citizens who are elected in their municipality at-large. Local government is organized in a collective form (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). Executive councillors are chosen by, and usually from, the council whilst retaining their base office in the council. So too the mayor, who is proposed by the council and formally appointed by central government in Flanders and Brussels Capital, and semi-directly elected in Wallonia. Together, the mayor and aldermen form the executive board which is expected to implement the local policies as they have been laid down by the council¹⁰.

Which factors could determine political representation in this institutional setting? Some elements could lead us to reject Pitkin's claim at the outset, hence confirm the adverse

⁹ As Table 5.8 and Table 5.9 in Appendix E show, this is the case in practice. Indeed, we find a moderately positive correlation between respondents' scores on all items, on both the attitudinal and behavioural levels. The mean scores for all items are above average too. This implies that councillors seldom explicitly prefer/claim to contribute to one or more items, hence style of representation, to the detriment of the other(s).

¹⁰ Yet in practice, the executive has a strong hold on municipal affairs throughout the policy process (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; Verhelst et al., 2011).

quote (Steyvers et al., 2007) which states that contemporary representation mainly takes the form of the popular mode of delegation. In fact, Belgian local councillors are not only obliged to reside in the municipality they govern, but tend to be firmly rooted in the social and associational life of their local community as well. Close, informal contacts between citizens and councillors are, therefore, evocative of the Belgian local system (Plees, 2005). Such traits also reflect the prevailing system of *political localism*. According to the latter, municipalities are primarily the territorial expression of their local community, rather than efficient entities of public service delivery (Andrew & Goldsmith, 1998). Several indicators underscore positive effects of this system. For instance, studies have demonstrated that citizens place more trust in their local authorities than other political levels (Van Roosbroek & Van de Walle, 2006). Preferential voting is usually higher and more influential in local elections too whilst local government is the political level citizens are most familiar with, and most strongly identify with (Ackaert, 1996; Wauters et al., 2010). A negative example of the close connections between citizens and councillors could be the excesses of clientelism, corruption and favouritism (symbolically referred to as “*Belgian affairs*” in Thomassen & Esaiasson, 2006: 229). Nonetheless, it is argued that the extremes of this system are decreasing over time (André et al., 2010). Following from the above, our first general descriptive hypothesis states:

- *DH1: ‘Political representation in Belgian local governance tends towards the ideal-type of delegation (i.e. representation ‘from below’ and ‘ex ante’).’*

Yet other elements of the Belgian local context could evoke the opposite hypothesis, indeed rendering political representation more elitist – as Pitkin contends. Also in the Belgian local system, there is often talk of a *gap* between citizens and politics (Verlet et al., 2007; Wauters et al., 2010). The growing technicality and formality of decision-making could contribute to this. Multi-annual and strategic planning, expanding local tasks and central supervision: these elements probably call for a technocratic and entrepreneurial style of governance. So do numerous governance networks in which some councillors engage (e.g. inter-municipal co-operations, autonomous agencies, municipal companies, etc.). These networks are spreading fast in order to compensate for municipalities’ lack of autonomous capacity, and the need to tailor various services and provisions to alternating areas beyond that of the municipality. Additionally, local councillors are allowed to hold multiple offices at the provincial, regional, national and European level, as long as they do not combine two executive mandates simultaneously. This practice occurs fairly often in Belgium (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). Finally, and probably related to the above, the professionalization of the local councillor emerges as one of the paramount longitudinal evolutions in Belgian local politics (Reynaert et al., 2006). On the basis of these evolutions, it also seems plausible to generally hypothesize that:

- *DH2: ‘Political representation in Belgian local governance tends towards an elitist/entrepreneurial style (i.e. representation ‘from above’ and ‘ex post’).’*

Lastly, we should mention the impact of political parties in the Belgian (local) system. There is no doubt that the strong and omnipresent influence of political parties is a typical feature of the latter. According to De Winter and Dumont (2006: 972), “*the Belgian partitocracy violates the ideal-type chain of parliamentary delegation in many ways, insofar as political parties play a predominant role at each stage.*” Party politics is an integral part of *local* council business as well. In fact, research has shown how the local councils are marked by a strong and steep divide between the majority and the opposition (Verhelst et al., 2011). In this political landscape, the influence of (branches of) national political parties is rising steeply, even though local lists remain typical of the local system as well (Steyvers et al., 2008b). The following descriptive hypothesis concerning the impact of political parties on political representation seems thus probable too:

- *DH3: ‘Political representation in Belgian local governance tends to be embedded in the party sphere (i.e. representation ‘from above’).’*

5.6. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS: REPRESENTATIVE ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR OF BELGIAN LOCAL COUNCILLORS

The first step of our analysis is to interpret the general outlook of political representation in Belgian local governance at the attitudinal and behavioural level (research questions a and b). The combination of the three basic categories on our theoretical dimensions representative *direction* (i.e. ‘from above’, ‘neutral’ and ‘from below’) and representative *control* (i.e. ‘ex ante’, ‘neutral’ and ‘ex post’) yields a basic matrix of nine cells. Accordingly, we distinguish nine modes of political representation: the four ideal-types proposed by the Andeweg/Thomassen typology, one completely neutral mode which represents the all-round councillor who values (and/or claims to contribute to) the four items under study in equal measure, and four intermediate positions. Each cell in the matrix displays the percentage of respondents that correspond to this particular style of political representation.

Table 5.3. Representative attitude of Belgian local councillors

		Ex Ante (<i>explanation < debate</i>)	Control Neutral (<i>explanation = debate</i>)	Ex Post (<i>explanation > debate</i>)
Direction	From Above (<i>program > society</i>)	① 3.9 %	4.2 %	② 3.5 %
	Neutral (<i>program = society</i>)	10.7 %	③ 22.9 %	7.5 %
	From Below (<i>program < society</i>)	④ 16.7 %	22.5 %	⑤ 8.1 %

(1: Authorization, 2: Accountability, 3: All-round, 4: Delegation, 5: Responsiveness) (N = 839)

Table 5.3 maps out the distribution of response at the **attitudinal** level. Which styles of political representation are deemed most important by Belgian local councillors? The largest group of respondents attributes equal importance to the four items of the representative system (i.e. position 3). These councillors aim at being all-round representatives who equally and simultaneously incorporate the styles of delegation, authorization, accountability and responsiveness. Hence, most Belgian councillors feel it is equally important to represent local issues bottom-up, implement the party program top-down, publicize debate on local policy issues beforehand and explain council decisions afterwards. Amongst the remaining councillor population, the largest group clearly prefers delegation (i.e. position 4) and its surrounding neutral positions as the dominant style(s) of representation. Generally, more Belgian local councillors thus prefer representing issues from local society from below over implementing their party program from above. And likewise, they choose to publicize debate on local issues before decisions are taken over explaining those decisions afterwards. Only a minority of Belgian councillors adhere to responsiveness (i.e. position 5) and particularly authorization (i.e. position 1) and accountability (i.e. position 2) as the dominant style(s) of representation¹¹.

In summary, we would argue that on a general level, the population of Belgian local councillors holds a rather popular view on the representative role. Principally, they

¹¹ The dominance of ‘delegation’ contradicts the result from our classic analysis of representative style, in which only a minority of the councillors claimed to be *delegates*. This confirms the claim and intention of Andeweg and Thomassen (2005), namely developing a typology that is constructed on different grounds than the classic orthodoxy.

foremost consider themselves as delegates of the local community that translate important constituency issues in public policy whilst seeking to obtain broad public support via debate before concrete decisions are taken. Such a conclusion confirms the theoretical claim which posits that delegation is the ideal-typical style of representation. It also underlines the prevalence of community representation as a cornerstone of the Belgian local system. Thus at the attitudinal level, the analysis leads us to confirm hypothesis 1 while we find less evidence to support hypothesis 2 and 3. Nevertheless, we must nuance these conclusions by the fact that most councillors aim at being all-round councillors. Furthermore, the preference for representation from below and ex ante does not imply a strict and strong reticence for representation from above and ex post either since we find positive correlations between the scores on all the items (see Table 5.8 in Appendix E). In the eyes of the councillors, representation does not entail a strict choice of one particular style that excludes the other complementary styles. Rather, it is about finding the most appropriate nuance in being a democratic and effective elected representative of the citizens.

Table 5.4. Representative behaviour of Belgian local councillors

		Ex Ante (<i>explanation < debate</i>)	Control Neutral (<i>explanation = debate</i>)	Ex Post (<i>explanation > debate</i>)
Direction	From Above (<i>program > society</i>)	① 4.6 %	7.9 %	② 7.3 %
	Neutral (<i>program = society</i>)	7.3 %	③ 23.5 %	13.9 %
	From Below (<i>program < society</i>)	④ 10.2 %	14.8 %	⑤ 10.6 %

(1: Authorization, 2: Accountability, 3: All-round, 4: Delegation, 5: Responsiveness) (N = 840)

Can we find a similar pattern on the **behavioural** level? Table 5.4 demonstrates that this is not exactly the case. At first sight, the overall picture of response seems more balanced compared to the analysis of the attitudes. A majority of respondents still think of themselves as all-round representatives who contribute equally to every aspect of their role (i.e. position 3). In their opinion, following the party line does not hold them back from defending constituency issues in practice whilst publicizing debate on council

business beforehand does not deter them from communicating its outcome afterwards, and vice versa. Accordingly, in practice, political representation is not a strict zero-sum game in which councillors act according to the principles of one mode or style, rejecting the other styles.

Yet simultaneously, the table takes account of some clear shifts in representation from the attitudinal to the (acclaimed) behavioural level. Generally and in line with theoretical expectations, the nature of representation shifts away from delegation (i.e. position 4) as the ideal-type towards a more entrepreneurial style in practice. This entrepreneurial style entails more representation from above and, particularly, representation *ex post*. Parties thus steer councillors' behaviour in office more than councillors principally prefer, underlining the fact that parties are important, but not all-embracing, actors of political representation in Belgian local democracy. In fact, the centre of the representative *direction* is still situated 'below'. Second, councillors acknowledge that in practice, *control* on the representative relation predominantly takes place 'ex post'. By communicating the outcome of the process of decision-making rather than stimulating debate on it beforehand, councillors mainly encourage, or perhaps rather allow, citizens to judge their merits at the end of the representative process. As a result, councillors indicate that authorization (i.e. position 1) and especially accountability (i.e. position 2) and responsiveness (i.e. position 5) are more important in practice than in principle. Table 5.5 reiterates this discrepancy between representative attitude and behaviour¹².

Table 5.5. Discrepancy between representative attitude and behaviour in Belgian local governance

		Ex Ante (<i>explanation < debate</i>)	Control Neutral (<i>explanation = debate</i>)	Ex Post (<i>explanation > debate</i>)
Direction	From Above (<i>program > society</i>)	① + 0.7 %	+ 3.7 %	② + 3.8 %
	Neutral (<i>program = society</i>)	- 3.4 %	③ + 0.6 %	+ 6.4 %
	From Below (<i>program < society</i>)	④ - 6.5 %	- 7.7 %	⑤ + 2.5 %

(1: Authorization, 2: Accountability, 3: All-round, 4: Delegation, 5: Responsiveness)

¹² This discrepancy is also graphically presented in Appendix E.

In summary, councillors argue that representation indeed takes a more elitist twist in practice, stressing the impact of political parties and an entrepreneurial style of governance. Nevertheless, the overall distribution of response is still quite balanced over the different theoretical modes of representation. We can, therefore, not truly accept any of our basic descriptive hypotheses at the behavioural level. Furthermore, we find positive correlations between the four items under study again as well (see Table 5.9 Appendix E). This demonstrates that representative styles are not mutually exclusive in practice either.

5.7. EXPLANATORY ANALYSIS: DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN BELGIAN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Our findings thus far have concerned the population of Belgian local councillors as a whole. The next goal of our study is to refine these descriptive insights by searching for underlying factors that account for variation in the representative attitudes and (acclaimed) behaviour (research question c). For this purpose, we draw on the varied insights from the literature and the specificities of the Belgian context to select a wide variety of possible determinants of political representation in Belgian local governance. All variables from this extensive analytical model were included in the mail survey. We have arranged them in four broad categories and offer several corresponding explanatory research hypotheses.

5.7.1. *Political profile*

We consider the political profile of the local councillors as a first possible determinant of political representation via a selection of independent variables¹³. First, several elements of councillors' position in the political system might call for, or further enhance, a particular style of representation. In the Belgian context, for instance, a steep divide exists between the political majority and the opposition in the council (Steyvers et al., 2010; Verhelst et al., 2011). When it comes to representation, particularly the majority might be expected to act according to the mode of authorization, following the mandate they received from their constituency to run the municipality (Andeweg & Thomassen,

¹³ All these independent variables are dummies: 'Position': majority party (N=518 or 63.7%); 'Executive function' : yes, now or before (N=277 or 33.3%); 'Multiple office-holding': yes, now or before – a legislative or executive mandate at the provincial, regional or federal level (N=75 or 9.3%); 'Formal local network': yes, now or before – a position in a municipal company or co-operative body of local authorities (N=434 or 53.9%); 'Party list': national (N=616 or 72.9%); 'Party': socialist or communist (N=165 or 21.5%); 'Experience': newcomer (N=309 or 36.4%); 'Ideology': pronounced – values 0 to 2 and 8 to 10 on a 0-10 scale for councillors' ideological self-placement (N=232 or 27.1).

2005)¹⁴. Additionally, professional office-holding might foster more elitist ways of representation (Herrick, 2011). In this respect, it is widely acknowledged that there is a huge gap in terms of entrepreneurialism between councillors in executive functions and the other councillors (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; Wayenberg et al., 2010). Likewise, we expect that councillors who develop a professional career by combining offices at different political levels are more likely to adopt an entrepreneurial style, just as councillors who participate in specific formal governance networks (e.g. inter-municipal cooperation, municipal agency). These expectations are expressed in our first (set of) explanatory research hypotheses:

- *EH1: ‘Councillors from the majority (EH1a) tend more towards authorization (i.e. representation ‘from above’ and ‘ex ante’). Councillors with experience in an executive mandate (EH1b), at another government level (EH1c) and/or in a formal local governance network (EH1d) tend more towards the entrepreneurial style of political representation (i.e. representation ‘from above’ and ‘ex post’).’*

Furthermore, councillors’ representative style could be determined by the characteristics of the party or political movement they belong to as well. We thereby distinguish, first, between the typical national party lists (or local branches of national party lists) and the typical local lists or groups. Both have their distinct dynamics and organization (Boogers, 2007). In terms of representative style, the local lists are often characterized by their bottom-up perspective, even called *clietelism* or *populism* (Boogers, 2007). As such, they still somehow reflect the non-political or non-partisan side of local politics (Steyvers et al., 2008b). National lists, on the other hand, are more professionalized and organized. Councillors from these lists would thus be more inclined to govern top-down. Second, there are theoretical and empirical grounds to assume that party ideology could be a factor for councillors’ representative style. Strict party organization, support and discipline have been typically attributed to the parties on the left side of the political spectrum (Eliassen & Pedersen, 1978; Garraud, 1989). Consequently, socialist and (formerly) communist councillors more often qualify as loyal partisans (Jewell, 1983). The possible impact of the party is summarized in the following hypotheses:

- *EH2: ‘Councillors elected on national party lists (EH2a) and councillors from socialist/communist parties (EH2b) tend more towards representation as service to the party (i.e. representation ‘from above’).’*

¹⁴ Even though this claim was not corroborated in the Dutch study of Andeweg and Thomassen (2005).

Finally, empirical evidence suggests two other hypotheses regarding councillors' political profile (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Cooper & Richardson, 2006). The first holds that *newcomers* or *novices* (i.e. councillors who are elected for the first time) stay closer to the views of their constituency because of electoral uncertainty, as well as the probability that an independent representational style grows throughout the legislature. Hence, newcomers would adopt a bottom-up approach to representation in particular. The second hypothesis states that councillors with a pronounced ideological profile are more likely to adopt an elitist, top-down style of representing their constituency. Indeed, such councillors have clear policy views of their own to pursue and rely on¹⁵. Our final explanatory hypotheses with regard to councillors' political profile consequently state:

- *EH3: 'Newcomers in the council (EH3a) tend to stay closer to the views of the electorate (i.e. representation 'from below'). Councillors with a pronounced ideological profile (EH3b), on the other hand, tend to rather follow their own ideas (i.e. representation 'from above').'*

5.7.2. Contact profile

In addition to councillors' political profile, we have also included their contact profile with a group of relevant stakeholders in local governance as a possible determinant in the analysis. Communication/information has always been regarded as a fundamental aspect of the circular proceeding of political representation (Pitkin, 1967; Vieira & Runciman, 2008). Moreover, in the context of modern local governance, communication with a wide array of new actors involved in the process of decision-making has become even more important (Bekkers & Edwards, 2007). In our analysis, we have introduced a list of six actors or institutions that councillors possibly interact with: 'municipal government', 'the party group', actors from the 'political and economic society', actors from the 'civil society', 'individual citizens' and 'journalists'¹⁶. We can broadly divide these actors into two groups: *inward-looking* contacts (i.e. municipal government, the party group and the political/economic society) and more *outward-looking* counterparts (i.e. civil society,

¹⁵ We addressed councillors' ideological pronunciation directly, i.e. in terms of their self-placement on a 0-10 left/right scale, instead of using the party as the overarching determinant of councillors' ideological profile.

¹⁶ These variables are based on the original question: "How frequently do you have contact with the following individuals or groups?", scaled 0 (almost never) to 3 (a few times a week). Three variables are comprised of different individual variables, forming one factor with sufficient internal reliability: 'Municipal government' (consists of the mayor, members of the executive board, municipal CEO and civil servants; Cronbach's Alpha=.86); 'Political/economic society' (consists of representatives of private business, upper level government, public agencies at the local level; Cronbach's Alpha=.78) and 'Civil society' (consists of representatives of unions, voluntary associations, women organizations, organizations of an ethnic minority; Cronbach's Alpha=.70). The other items are single variables.

citizens and journalists). Theoretically, we can expect that councillors who frequently engage with political *insiders* might be inclined towards a more entrepreneurial/elitist representative style. Councillors who keep close contacts with the *outsiders*, on the other hand, would then rather prefer a popular style of representation (Herrick, 2011). As such, our fourth explanatory hypothesis states:

- *EH4: 'Councillors who have frequent inward-looking contacts with political insiders (EH4a) tend more towards an entrepreneurial style (i.e. representation 'from above' and 'ex post'), while councillors who have frequent outward-looking contacts with political outsiders (EH4b) tend more towards a popular style of representation (i.e. representation 'from below' and 'ex ante').'*

5.7.3. Personal profile

As the third independent level of our analysis, we examine the effect of a number of characteristics in councillors' personal profile¹⁷. It has often been stated that an exclusive social profile leads towards an elitist view on political representation (Jewell, 1983; Cooper & Richardson, 2006; Herrick, 2011). Hence, we have introduced the variables gender, age and education as possible determinants in the analysis. The corresponding hypothesis reads:

- *EH5: 'Councillors with an exclusive social profile (i.e. male, elder and highly educated) tend more towards an entrepreneurial style (i.e. representation 'from above' and 'ex post').'*

Furthermore, since professionalization is claimed to spur entrepreneurial or elitist conceptions of representation (Herrick, 2011), we also analyze the impact of councillors' initial motivations to run for office. These may theoretically range from typical layman motives (i.e. citizen duty, representing a particular group) to more *professional* counterparts (i.e. party duty, establishing a political career). Whereas the typical layman conception of the local councillor corresponds most to the ideal-type of delegation, the modern professionalized councillor is more likely to act on the basis of the modern

¹⁷ Dummy variables: 'Gender': male (N=612 or 72.4%); 'Education': university (N=543 or 64.3%); 'Ambition': static (N=323 or 42.6%); 'Ambition': progressive (N=241 or 31.8%). Continuous variables: 'Age' (N=844, mean=49.8); Motivations, based on the question: "*When you first accepted to become a candidate, how important were the following reasons*", scaled 0 (not important at all) to 4 (of utmost importance): 'Citizen duty' (N=834, mean=2.1), 'Group duty' (N=836, mean=2.7), 'Party duty' (N=837, mean=2.4), 'Political career' (N=835, mean=1.1); 'Citizen participation', based on the question: "*Please indicate how important for local democracy you feel the following requirements are: Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions*", scaled 0 (not important at all) to 4 (of utmost importance), N=837, mean=2.3.

entrepreneurial variant, i.e. accountability. According to this hypothesis, therefore, we expect that:

- *EH6: ‘Councillors who were inspired by layman motives (EH6a) tend more towards a popular style of representation (i.e. representation ‘from below’ and ‘ex ante’), while councillors who were inspired by professional motives (EH6b) tend more towards an entrepreneurial style (i.e. representation ‘from above’ and ‘ex post’).’*

Additionally, we have incorporated councillors’ ambitions for the future as a possible determinant of their representative style. Concerning this matter, some studies have found that static or progressive political ambitions predict popular styles of representation (Herrick, 2011)¹⁸. Indeed, a politician who does not wish to continue in office will probably have less incentives to follow the popular instructions of his or her constituency. Yet for councillors who are keen to stay (or move up) in office, it is less profitable to govern in a strictly independent and elitist way because the need the support of their constituency to get re-elected. The seventh hypothesis subsequently states:

- *EH7: ‘Councillors who hold static or progressive political ambitions tend more towards a popular style of representation (i.e. representation ‘from below’ and ‘ex ante’).’*

Lastly, we examine the impact of councillors’ attitude towards the active involvement of citizens in the process of local decision-making. Representation and participation have often been regarded as two conflicting regimes of democracy. Yet scholars nowadays agree that modern democratic governance entails a hybrid mix of representative *and* participative democracy (De Rynck, 2002; Steyver et al., 2007). Steyvers et al. (2007) thereby argue that an open mind for active citizen input probably leads towards an open style of political representation which resembles delegation as the ideal-type. Consequently, hypothesis eight reads:

- *EH8: ‘Councillors who champion the active involvement of citizens in local decision-making tend towards the ideal-typical style of delegation (i.e. representation ‘from below’ and ‘ex ante’).’*

¹⁸ Even though other studies have come to an opposite conclusion as well, i.e. with progressive ambitions corresponding to decreasing consideration of constituency views (Jewell, 1983).

5.7.4. *Institutional context*

As the final independent level of analysis, we take into account three variables from the wider institutional context of Belgian local governance that could facilitate an entrepreneurial representative style¹⁹. The variable ‘region’ refers to the regionalization of Belgian local government by the fifth state reform of 2001. Ever since, it is expected that an entrepreneurial and managerial logic has spread faster in the Flemish region in particular, while Wallonia and Brussels Capital remain more reminiscent of the traditional value of community representation (Steyvers et al., 2006; Pilet, 2008). Further, ‘size’ is a variable that has been included and examined often in studies on political representation (Thomassen & Esaiasson, 2006; Herrick, 2011). On a smaller scale, it is seemingly easier for politicians to collect and reckon with constituency demands. Larger government units imply more heterogeneity, which makes it more difficult for politicians to convey community demands into public policies. A final useful distinction in the institutional context of the municipality discerns between coalition governments and municipalities that are run by an absolute majority (Urbinati & Warren, 2008). Such municipalities, which still occur fairly often at the Belgian local level, could be more likely to encourage an entrepreneurial style since their councillors might feel more empowered to express and impose their viewpoints in the policy-making process. Accordingly, our hypothesis on the institutional context states:

- *EH9: ‘Flemish councillors (EH9a), councillors from larger municipalities (EH9b) and councillors from a municipality that is governed by an absolute majority (EH9c) tend more towards an entrepreneurial style of governance (i.e. representation from above and ex post).’*

¹⁹ All variables are dummies: ‘Region’: Flanders (N=565 or 66%); ‘Size’: large municipality – i.e. 20.000 inhabitants or more (N=280 or 33.2%); ‘Political balance’: absolute majority (N=282 or 32.9).

5.7.5. *Explanatory analysis*

The explanatory analysis assesses the variation in councillors' representative style according to the interplay of these variables. We use a multiple linear regression analysis (see Table 5.6) to reveal the relative impact of each independent variable on the representative attitude and behaviour of the councillors, as well as the predictive value of the entire model (i.e. the Adjusted R^2 value). The dependent variables represent the constituting dimensions of our theoretical model on political representation: representative *direction* and representative *control*²⁰. Positive scores in the analysis indicate that the independent variable predicts representation 'from above' and/or 'ex post'. Negative scores indicate that the independent variable predicts representation 'from below' and/or 'ex ante'.

²⁰ In order to obtain a more nuanced analysis, we do not use the three broad categories of the descriptive analysis as dependent variables (i.e. from above, neutral, from below; ex ante, neutral and ex post). Instead, we have constructed two indices, i.e. representative 'direction' and representative 'control', by subtracting the respondents' score (range 0-4) on item 2 from item 1 (constituting the index 'representative direction') and their score (range 0-4) on item 4 from item 3 (constituting the index 'representative control'). Hence, the indices used as dependent variables in the analysis vary from -4 (from below and/or ex ante) to 4 (from above and/or ex post).

Table 5.6. Determinants of political representation in Belgian local governance: a multiple linear regression analysis

	Attitude		Behaviour	
	<i>Direction</i>	<i>Control</i>	<i>Direction</i>	<i>Control</i>
Political profile				
Position: majority party	-.05	.08	.06	.06
Executive function: yes	.06	.00	.01	.01
Multiple office holding: yes	-.04	-.06	-.03	-.06
Formal local network: yes	-.03	-.01	-.02	-.06
Party list: national	.00	-.10 **	.07	.04
Party: socialist	-.01	.07	-.02	.04
Experience: newcomer	.01	.06	.03	.03
Ideology: pronounced	.01	.00	.06	.04
Contact profile				
Municipal government	.11 *	.12 *	.00	-.07
Party group	.11 **	.01	.09 *	-.04
Political/economic society	-.08	-.07	.06	.01
Civil society	-.01	-.01	-.12 **	-.06
Individual citizens	-.13 **	.07	-.10 *	.13 **
Journalists	.00	.00	-.03	.05
Personal profile				
Gender: male	.00	-.03	.07	-.04
Age	.06	.06	.06	-.01
Education: university	-.09 *	-.09 *	-.01	-.09 *
Citizen duty	-.01	-.18 ***	.02	-.11 **
Group duty	.02	-.01	.07	.06
Party duty	.26 ***	.04	.09 *	.09 *
Political career	-.01	.13 **	-.03	-.03
Ambition: static	-.11 *	-.04	.07	-.09
Ambition: progressive	-.08	.04	.04	-.03
Citizen participation	-.02	-.07	-.04	-.14 ***
Institutional context				
Region: Flanders	.11 **	-.11 **	.04	.03
Size: large municipality	.01	-.10 **	.11 **	.00
Political balance: absolute majority	-.01	-.02	.05	.06
Model				
<i>N</i>	537	538	536	536
<i>Adjusted R</i> ²	.09 ***	.10 ***	.04 **	.04 **

(Level of Significance: *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$)

Which factors determine councillors' **attitude** towards political representation? For both direction and control, our model is highly significant. Its explanatory power, however, is only moderate, predicting nearly 10% of the variance at the dependent level of analysis. As Table 5.6 shows, councillors' 'political profile' does not systematically determine their representative attitude. Only one significant result emerges. Councillors who were elected on a national party list prefer ex ante control on the representative relation. They pay more importance to publicizing debate on local issues than explaining council decisions afterwards. However, none of the hypothesized relations is confirmed in our analysis. An exclusive position in the political system, the nature of the party or the experience and ideological profile do not significantly determine councillors' attitude towards political representation.

Second, councillors' 'contact profile' clearly produces more explanatory effects. As hypothesized, councillors who frequently interact with other actors inside the political sphere are more prone to an entrepreneurial representative style. We find the clearest effect from the contact pattern with the actors of traditional municipal government such as the executive board, the municipal CEO and civil servants. Councillors who have close ties with traditional government prefer representation from above and ex post, hence the entrepreneurial mode of accountability is their dominant style. Further, councillors who often deliberate with their party group tend to prefer representation from above. Contacts with actors of the political/economic society that are increasingly involved in local governance (e.g. other political levels, business representatives, public agencies) have no significant effect on the representative attitude. On the other hand, the relationship with the world outside the political system has less impact on councillors' representative style. One significant result emerges: as expected, it seems that councillors who keep in touch with individual citizens frequently have a clear preference for representation from below.

Third, councillors' 'personal profile' has a significant impact on their representative attitude as well. Our data do not confirm the acclaimed impact of an exclusive social background, however. Gender and age produce no significant effects and the effect of education is even opposite to our expectations. Councillors who are highly educated support the most popular and idealistic style of representation, namely delegation (i.e. representation from below and ex ante). Additionally, the initial motivation to run for office has some impact as well. In line with our theoretical expectations, we find that councillors who were inspired by citizen duty prefer citizen control ex ante (the popular variant) whilst councillors who aspired a political career prefer citizen control ex post (the entrepreneurial variant). Councillors whose candidacy was underpinned by a strong sense of party duty obviously lean towards representation from above. The last significant result stems from councillors' ambitions for the future. As expected, we notice that councillors who wish to remain in office pay more importance to the opinion of the

locality, i.e. advocating representation from below. Councillors who agree that citizens should play an active role in decision-making do not hold different attitudes towards their own role as elected representative than councillors who are less fond of citizen participation.

Finally, what about the ‘institutional context’? The impact of region is striking: Flemish councillors clearly think of authorization (i.e. representation from above and *ex ante*) as the best way to act as elected representative. Councillors from Wallonia and Brussels thus rather support the responsive style. Size matters too. Yet councillors from larger municipalities prefer *ex ante* controls by citizens rather than the expected *ex post* controls. Size has no significant impact on the representative direction, while an absolute majority has no significant effect at all.

On the **behavioural level**, we find a different pattern of explanation. Generally, our model predicts less variation at the dependent level. Furthermore, less variables exert a significant impact. Which are the significant determinants of our model? First, it is surprising to see how councillors’ ‘political profile’ does not appear to influence representative behaviour in any direct, significant way. On the other hand, councillors’ ‘contact profile’ again has significant impact. This impact is particularly felt in the direction of the representative relation. Councillors who keep close contacts with their party group claim to be more preoccupied with the implementation of their party program in practice too. Councillors who frequently communicate with actors from outside the political system, such as the civil society, contribute more to representing the issues from local society – as expected. Besides, councillors who have close ties with individual citizens clearly tend more towards representation from below as well. Still, unlike our expectations, they also indicate that they contribute more to representation *ex post*, putting more efforts in explaining decisions afterwards than publicizing debate beforehand. Hence, for these councillors responsiveness seems the dominant style of representation. Other contact patterns have no significant (direct) impact on representative behaviour.

Third, councillors’ ‘personal profile’ predicts most variation in the control on the representative relation. Councillors who are highly educated contribute more to publicizing the debate on local issues than explaining them afterwards. Councillors who were driven by citizen duty facilitate such *ex ante* controls as well. The strongest predictor is councillors’ opinion on citizen participation. Councillors who support the active inclusion of citizens in policy-making appear to bring this view into practice by publicizing debate on local issues, rather than explaining decisions that already have been taken. Lastly, councillors who motivated their candidacy in terms of party duty claim to champion accountability as the dominant style of representation. In their opinion, they contribute more to entrepreneurial representation from above and *ex post*.

Finally, effects of the ‘institutional context’ are less outspoken in comparison with their impact at the attitudinal level. The only significant result points out that councillors from larger municipalities contribute more to representation from above. Apparently, (this part of) party politics is (still) less vibrant in smaller municipalities in comparison with the larger cities.

In summary (see also Table 5.7 and Box 5.1), our analysis suggests that the representative style of Belgian local councillors is substantially determined by the individual councillors’ personal profile. First, the initial motivation that inspired councillors to run for office determines their fundamental role orientation later on. Whereas layman motives predict more popular variants of representation, professional motives often lead towards an entrepreneurial conception and implementation of the representative role. Second, future ambitions, but also a higher education and support for active citizen participation, might prompt councillors to have more popular orientations towards their representative role as well. Additionally, once councillors are installed in office, their contact pattern with other actors in governance affects their representative style. The general pattern is that outward-looking contacts correspond more with popular styles of representation. Councillors who are mainly directed to the internal sphere of the local system are more inclined to an entrepreneurial style of representation. Finally, the institutional context affects political representation to a certain extent. Flemish councillors prefer authorization as dominant style, but act not accordingly. Larger municipalities spur councillors to prefer ex ante control on the representative relation via public debate, but mainly foster representation from above in practice.

On the other hand, it is remarkable that some variables appear to have no direct influence in explaining the variation in (councillors’ orientation towards) political representation at all. Most surprisingly, this is mainly the case for the political profile of our local councillors. Councillors from the majority, as well as councillors who have gained additional governance experience (in the executive board, at other government levels, in formal networks) do not hold different attitudes from their less experienced and professionalized counterparts, nor do they claim to behave any differently. Furthermore, the hypothesized effects from socialist alignment, experience and ideology were not corroborated either. In terms of councillors’ contact profile, it seems that contacts with the political/economic society and journalists do not significantly affect political representation. Representative attitudes and behaviour take shape regardless of councillors’ gender and age also. Additionally, councillors who ran for office in order to highlight the needs of a particular group do not differ systematically with regard to their representative style, just as councillors who hold progressive political ambitions. Finally

at the contextual level, whether or not councillors have a seat in a municipality that is governed by an absolute majority does not significantly affect representation²¹.

Table 5.7. Political representation: strength of the individual predictors

Predictor	Analytical Level	Significant relations [X/4]
Individual citizen contact	Contact profile	3
Education	Personal profile	3
Party duty motive	Personal profile	3
Municipal government contact	Contact profile	2
Party group contact	Contact profile	2
Citizen duty motive	Personal profile	2
Region	Institutional context	2
Size	Institutional context	2
Party list	Political profile	1
Civil society contact	Contact profile	1
Political career motive	Personal profile	1
Ambition	Personal profile	1
Citizen participation	Personal profile	1
<i>All other variables</i>		0

²¹ Perhaps, this is also due to the fact that many of these research hypotheses have originally been framed in the classic orthodoxy on political representation.

Box 5.1. Representative attitude and behaviour: overview of the research hypotheses

Hypothesis		Attitude	Behaviour
Descriptive hypotheses:			
DH1	Representation is mainly from below/ex ante	✓/✓	⊗
DH2	Representation is mainly from above/ex post	✗/✗	⊗
DH3	Representation is mainly from above	✗	⊗
Explanatory hypotheses:			
<i><u>Political profile</u></i>			
EH1a	Majority more from above/ex ante	⊗/⊗	⊗/⊗
EH1b	Executive more from above/ex post	⊗/⊗	⊗/⊗
EH1c	Multiple office more from above/ex post	⊗/⊗	⊗/⊗
EH1d	Local network more from above/ex post	⊗/⊗	⊗/⊗
EH2a	National party list more from above	⊗	⊗
EH2b	Socialist party more from above	⊗	⊗
EH3a	Newcomer more from below	⊗	⊗
EH3b	Pronounced ideology more from above	⊗	⊗
<i><u>Contact profile</u></i>			
EH4a	Inward contacts more from above/ex post	✓/(✓)	(✓)/⊗
EH4b	Outward contacts more from below/ex ante	(✓)/⊗	✓/(✗)
<i><u>Personal characteristics</u></i>			
EH5	Exclusive profile more from above/ex post	(✗)/(✗)	⊗/(✗)
EH6a	Layman motives more from below/ex ante	⊗/(✓)	⊗/(✓)
EH6b	Professional motives more from above/ex post	(✓)/(✓)	(✓)/(✓)
EH7	Ambitious more from below/ex ante	(✓)/⊗	⊗/⊗
EH8	Citizen participation more from below/ex ante	⊗/⊗	⊗/✓
<i><u>Institutional context</u></i>			
EH9a	Flemish more from above/ex post	✓/✗	⊗/⊗
EH9b	Large municipality more from above/ex post	⊗/✗	✓/⊗
EH9c	Absolute majority more from above/ex post	⊗/⊗	⊗/⊗

(✓: hypothesis confirmed, ⊗: no significant result, ✗: hypothesis reversed)

5.8. CONCLUSION

Among the most apparent evolutions in contemporary political science is the renewed attention for political representation. At the local level, the role as elected representative is often considered to be an increasingly daunting task. On one hand, social evolutions such as fading political trust and growing electoral apathy call for a renewed and stronger bond between citizens and their representatives. Yet on the other hand, the complexity and technicality of modern decision-making in local governance encourage an intense professionalization of the political mandate. Meanwhile, citizens and local stakeholders search for new ways to participate in the political process beyond the mere passive act of voting or party membership. In this setting of competing claims, representatives ought to function as a lever for transparent and legitimate decision-making and, ultimately, democracy. Some observers hold a pessimistic view on this evolution: representation is then claimed to have become elitist and even undemocratic. Others, however, are more optimistic. They argue that the contemporary context rather fosters popular ways of representing the locality.

This chapter has sought to empirically underscore the debate by studying councillors' view on political representation in Belgian local governance, both on the attitudinal and the behavioural level. Generally, it seems that a majority of Belgian local councillors attribute equal importance to delegation, authorization, responsiveness and accountability whilst claiming to be such all-round representatives in practice too. Moreover, differences in terms of the preferred style seldom drastically oppose, or exclude one another. Party politics might thus be an important impetus for political representation, as is conveying requests and issues from the local community into the political system. Similarly, ex post control on the representative relation via policy communication does not exclude ex ante controls via public debate. Hence, we did not find strong evidence for a straightforward elitist style of political representation in Belgian local governance. Given the fact that councillors' overall impact in local governance could be on the wane (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; Verhelst et al., 2011), this tenacity for an all-round, inclusive style of representation might not come as a total surprise. In fact, by stretching their role as elected representatives to the extreme, councillors might seek to preserve their role in the local system.

Yet over and above this general picture, we did come across significant variation amongst our research population. On the attitudinal level, more councillors prefer the popular mode of delegation. This vision stems mainly from their personal characteristics (e.g. political motives, education and ambition), contacts with several actors in the governance arena (e.g. municipal government, the party group and citizens) and the institutional context (e.g. region and size). Nevertheless, principles do not always align with practice.

On the behavioural level, the distribution of response is more equally dispersed over delegation, authorization, responsiveness and accountability. This means that in the daily proceedings of governance, representation does take an entrepreneurial twist, albeit not overwhelmingly so. Considering the complex policy challenges ahead, we might foresee a further increase of this style in the future. Still even if governance might inflict an entrepreneurial style, it requires enhanced links between politicians and society alike. Our analysis suggests that within local governance, the contact pattern with a wide array of actors in- and outside government (e.g. the party group, civil society and individual citizens) fundamentally determines representative behaviour, just as councillors' personal characteristics (e.g. attitude towards citizen participation, education and political motives). Traditional institutional features such as the municipal context and, above all, the representative's position in the political constellation have a less profound, or an indirect, impact.

To conclude, we can raise the question: How could research proceed from here? Even though our analysis has attempted to offer a dynamic conception of political representation in local governance, its quantitative research design has its limits. Complementary research could therefore help to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of political representation. First, it is key to consider our study as a cross-sectional benchmark that needs follow-up to interpret future evolutions and long-term trends in political representation. Second, the study could be widened and deepened in order to arrive at better insights on the impact of different structural and cultural contexts. Whilst the former approach implies comparative research, both within Belgium's multi-level polity and between different countries, the latter entails detailed in-depth analyses of councillors' representative style in particular settings (e.g. intricate governance networks versus standard service provision, participatory arrangements, specific dossiers, etc.). The final recommended line of research is probably the most challenging and important one from a democratic perspective. Indeed, any political regime is only truly legitimate insofar as its political views and practices match the expectations and judgements of the community it is meant to serve (Beetham, 1991). In terms of political representation, this implies that there should at least be some congruency between the views of representatives and the views of the represented (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Saward, 2010). Consequently, we suggest examining the congruency between the views of citizens and politicians to address the quality of democratic representation in contemporary local governance.

CHAPTER 6

REGIONAL DIVERGENCE, CONVERGENCE OR PATH-DEPENDENCY?

ANALYZING THE ROLE AND POSITION OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS IN FLANDERS AND WALLONIA IN COMPARISON WITH THE NETHERLANDS AND FRANCE

Abstract

It is frequently stated that the local political system in Belgium has diverged on both sides of the language border. While Flanders would have adopted the Northern style of its Dutch neighbour, Wallonia is claimed to have incorporated the Southern style of France. This chapter investigates this claim by systematically comparing the role and position of non-executive councillors in both regions with councillors of the acclaimed reference countries the Netherlands and France. Based on survey data, the chapter tackles several aspects of the research subject: political recruitment, role orientation, influence, relation with citizens and citizen participation, future ambitions and turnover motives. It demonstrates that there is some differentiation in the political system of the Belgian state (e.g. motivations, role attitude, party group, relation with citizens). Yet simultaneously, the international comparison places these results in a broader perspective. Compared to the Netherlands and France, the Belgian regions still have many characteristics in common while the Netherlands and France exhibit many signs of their typical state traditions as well (e.g. the importance of political parties, the local hierarchy). Furthermore, many aspects of councillors' role and position are currently even convergent across state boundaries and government traditions (e.g. professionalization, role discrepancy, the subordination to the political leaders).

Key Words

Local councillors – role – position – comparative politics

6.1. INTRODUCTION

Federalization and the subsequent rise of meso-government have been two of the most important evolutions in the history of Belgian post-war politics (Hooghe, 2004; De Ceuninck et al., 2005; Plees, 2005; Wayenberg et al., 2010). These processes were, and still are, mainly nourished by the ethnic and cultural tension between the Flemish population in the North of the country and the Walloon population in the South. Also with regard the local political system, scholars often report a diverging reality on both sides of the Belgian language border:

“Repeatedly, the hypothesis has been put forward that Belgium’s main linguistic divide also functions as the demarcation line between two types of local government system. The ‘Franco’ or Southern European type tends to prevail in Wallonia and Brussels as the primarily French-speaking parts of the country, while the Northern European type appears in the Dutch-speaking area, Flanders” (De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010: 14-15, see also De Ceuninck et al., 2005; Plees, 2005; Steyvers, 2006; Block et al., 2007).

According to Wayenberg et al. (2010: 75), therefore, *“one of the most intriguing questions is whether the country’s stories of sub-national politics should be told as a tale of regional divergence.”* Thus far, some particular stories have already been told. They focused mainly on the formal and structural arrangements of the political system in the wake of the transfer of the constitutive framework on local government to the regions Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital in 2001¹. This transfer empowered the regions to tailor their local systems to specific needs and preferences. Both Flanders (2005) and Wallonia (2006) also used this competence to promulgate a new local government act. Pilet (2008) notes that these acts indeed diverge in scope and outlook. Whereas the Flemish act is clearly interlaced with an efficiency-oriented and administrative logic, the Walloon act expresses the persistence of *political primacy* as its main device, thus enhancing the democratic capacity of local government (see also Wayenberg et al., 2010)². De Ceuninck et al. (2005) argue, however, that despite this divergent discourse, the Flemish system is still strongly indebted to its typical Belgian (i.e. Franco) legacy in practice. Also De Rynck and Wayenberg (2010) and Wayenberg et al. (2010) came to the conclusion that even though Flanders diverges from Wallonia in certain domains (e.g. stressing NPM-arrangements, different local taxation, a management-oriented governance style), many elements of their common path-dependent legacy persist.

¹ The transfer was a part of the fifth state reform, settled by the Lambermont Agreements in 2001. Previously, the supervision over municipalities (1980), the municipal fund (1988) and the competency for inter-municipal cooperation had already been transferred to the regions (Wayenberg et al., 2010).

² This is reflected in the name of the respective acts as well: the *Municipal Decree* in Flanders versus the *Code of Local Democracy and Decentralization* in Wallonia.

Hence, the formal structure of the local system endorses the divergence hypothesis to some extent. Yet simultaneously, it corroborates elements of the opposite hypothesis as well, implying that both systems reflect their common legacy in a path-dependent way. The goal of this chapter is to tell a new story of Belgian sub-national politics by tackling these basic comparative research hypotheses from a different, actor-centred perspective. On the basis of their self-evaluation, we namely examine the contemporary role and position of Flemish and Walloon councillors in the political system at the local level³. At least formally, councillors are considered to be the key actors of the political system (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). In this capacity, councillors' role and position are important determinants of the system's performance. Yet likewise, both are determined by the political system as well. In fact in Belgium and beyond, many authors have expressed their concern on the local councillor in modern governance due to a series of interconnected evolutions in the local system (Larsen, 2005; Wayenberg et al., 2010; Verhelst et al., 2011). Consequently, our study contributes to the regionalization debate through its endeavour to gain an understanding of a specific, relevant and topical aspect of the political system *in the field*.

Still in order to test the divergence and path-dependent hypotheses more profoundly, we will not only compare the councillors from Wallonia and Flanders to each other. We include councillors from the (acclaimed) referential local systems in the comparison as well. Accordingly, we study French councillors as theoretical examples of the Southern (i.e. *Franco*) style. Councillors from the Netherlands, on the other hand, serve as the (ideal-typical) examples of the Northern (i.e. *North-Middle European*) style⁴. In the meantime, this international perspective also raises a third fundamental research hypothesis. In fact, it is plausible that general trends in local democracy have led local systems to converge beyond traditional stereotypes and typologies too (Goldsmith & Page, 2010). In our study, this would imply that traditional comparative schemes no longer suffice to explain and classify councillors' roles and positions in the political system. Rather, they would be contingent upon broad general trends in local politics. In summary, the aim of our study is thus to verify three general research hypotheses:

³ The region Brussels Capital is not included in our analysis due to its distinct character as Capital region without full constitutive autonomy, 19 influential mayors and in-built mechanisms of linguistic balance between French-speakers and Dutch-speakers (Pilet et al., 2005; Wayenberg et al., 2010).

⁴ Additionally, France and the Netherlands share strong linguistic and historical roots with the Belgian regions.

- ***GH1:** ‘The role and position of Flemish and Walloon local councillors diverge, resembling the Northern style of the Netherlands and the Southern style of France respectively (i.e. the divergence hypothesis).’*
- ***GH2:** ‘Compared to the typical system of the Netherlands and France, Flemish and Walloon local councillors still bear more similarities than differences in the wake of their common Belgian path-dependent legacy (i.e. the path-dependent hypothesis).’*
- ***GH3:** ‘The role and position of local councillors in Flanders, Wallonia, the Netherlands and France has converged beyond traditional country systems and classifications due to universal evolutions in the political systems (i.e. the convergence hypothesis).’*

The next section of the chapter (*Section 6.2*) sets out our comparative research framework. More specifically, it focuses on those elements that might determine the role and position of local councillors in the three countries under study. Thereafter, we present our empirical data and research method (*Section 6.3*). The ensuing sections analyze and interpret the survey data. These seek to paint a nuanced and multifaceted picture of the councillors by examining several aspects of their role and position. Taken together, these aspects span a substantial part of the (political) life of the modern local councillor. The first component of the analysis reconstructs councillors’ recruitment process to the council, paying special attention to the trend of professionalization within (*Section 6.4*). The centre of the analysis scrutinizes councillors’ classic role orientation (*Section 6.5*), their influence in the local authority (*Section 6.6*) and their relation with the citizens of the locality (*Section 6.7*). Councillors’ future political ambitions and turnover motives are dealt with in the final component of the analysis (*Section 6.8*). Finally, the concluding section summarizes the results in response to the three broad research hypotheses raised above (*Section 6.9*).

6.2. COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK: SAME PLAYERS ON A DIFFERENT STAGE⁵

6.2.1. Organizing perspective

The three countries in our comparative framework share the dominant tradition of representative local democracy. In this system, local councillors are formally the foundation of local democracy (Stewart, 1991; Mouritzen & Svava, 2002; Berg & Rao, 2005). Yet in contrast with this formal stipulation, many authors have depicted councillors' political primacy as largely fictitious in practice (Denters & Klok, 2003; Kalk & De Rynck, 2003; Denters & Rose, 2005). Moreover, in recent decades a general belief has grown that particularly the impact of non-executive councillors has (further) declined, if not totally vanished in twenty-first century local governance (Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Berg & Rao, 2005; Larsen, 2005; Guérin & Kerrouche, 2008).

On one hand, this acclaimed strain on the role and position of local councillors may stem from several universal trends in local politics (Daemen & Schaap, 2000; Caulfield & Larsen, 2002; Kersting & Vetter, 2003; Berg & Rao, 2005; Denters & Rose, 2005; Reynaert et al, 2005; Wollmann, 2008; Goldsmith & Page, 2010). Amongst the most salient ones, a professionalized administration, NPM-techniques and market principles/practices on the output side of the system have come to accompany new ways of citizen participation on the input side. Meanwhile internally, many systems undergo personalized and strengthened forms of political leadership by the executive councillors and/or the mayor. Furthermore, also externally the pressure is piling on the councillors. This happens, amongst others, through multi-level governance and media influence (Jacobsen, 2009), party politics (Copus, 2004) and growing political apathy or distrust (Daemen & Schaap, 2000).

On the other hand, councillors' roles and positions may result from their specific governance context as well. This is why we will elaborate on several aspects of the overarching context of the political systems that could affect the councillors' role and position. This theoretical basis will help measure our basic research hypotheses against the different aspects of the empirical analysis further on. Throughout the contextual description we implicitly draw on a new institutionalist perspective. The latter is "*concerned with the informal conventions of political life as well as with formal constitutions and organizational structures*" (Lowndes, 2010: 71). This means that we expect that formal-institutional rules (i.e. legal provisions and procedures) *and* common

⁵ All ratio's and official statistics are calculated on the basis of figures (from 2011 for the Netherlands and Belgium, from 2012 for France – including the overseas departments and territories) that have been consulted on the official country websites (www.dgcl.interieur.gouv.fr; www.legifrance.gouv.fr; www.decentraalbestuur.nl; www.cbs.nl; statbel.fgov.be).

practice (i.e. the implementation of local government in practice) determine the way in which councillors function in their local authorities. Indeed, “*by including informal conventions as well as formal procedures, the new institutionalists are able to build a more fine-grained and realistic picture of what really constrains political behaviour and decision-making*” (Lowndes, 2010: 71).

6.2.2. France

France is the first country in our comparison. The French local system is typically considered an example of the Southern/Franco style (Page & Goldsmith, 1987; Hesse & Sharpe, 1991; Goldsmith, 1996). This implies that the main function or *raison d'être* of French local government is political. Municipalities first and foremost represent and express the place-bound community identity of their inhabitants (i.e. *communitarianism*). In addition to the extensive system of multiple office-holding that gives local politicians (i.e. often mayors) a strong voice in the regulation of local government at the national level, this place-bound solidarity is key to understand (the persistence of) the unique and enormous number and variety of French municipalities (Wollmann, 2000; Kerrouche, 2005; Pinson, 2010). The total municipal mosaic consists of 36.700 municipalities that count just 1.757 inhabitants on average. Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that many municipalities seek to overcome their lack of autonomous functional capacity by engaging in inter-municipal cooperation(s) (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005; Kerrouche, 2005)⁶. Further, only 943 municipalities (or 2.6%) have a population above 10.000. Yet these municipalities represent nearly half (49.3%) of the total French population. As many authors argue, the gap between this urban France and the remaining rural areas has widened over the past decades (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005; Drouin, 2006; Knapp & Wright, 2006). For some it has even resulted in “*two clearly differentiated systems of local government*” (Pinson, 2010: 86).

Every six years, more than half a million local councillors are elected in France (at the last elections in 2008, this figure amounted to 519.417). In municipalities counting less than 3.500 inhabitants, candidates are elected in a two-round majority system, with *panachage* allowed. In municipalities equal to or above this threshold, the winning party receives a 50% vote bonus whilst the remaining votes are distributed proportionally over the party lists that obtained at least 5% of the votes (Drouin, 2006). Even though this system was designed to assure at least some municipal opposition in larger

⁶ These inter-municipal structures develop their policies quite autonomously, despite compulsory reports to the council. Since the majority of the local councillors are excluded from these structures, doubts can be raised on the democratic quality of decision-making in such systems (Drouin, 2006). Furthermore, also internally a differentiation arises between the participants – as often mayors of the strongest municipality in the co-operative structure take the upper hand (Kerrouche, 2005).

municipalities, it (still) strongly propels the underrepresentation of the latter in the council (Kerrouche, 2005; Knapp & Wright, 2006). The council meetings are held at least once per trimester. Additionally, councils are entitled to organize standing committees. Decisions are also prepared in preceding plenary meetings and party groups behind closed doors (Drouin, 2006).

The number of councillors per council varies between 9 and 69 according to the municipal size⁷. An average councillor in France represents just 124 inhabitants, even though the huge spread of municipal size causes considerable differences regarding this figure. Still as Drouin (2006) notes, the proximity and resulting familiarity between citizens and councillors contributes to the popularity of local government in larger municipalities too. Indeed, the *démocratie de proximité*, impersonated by the municipalities, forms one of the pillars of French democracy (Knapp & Wright, 2006; Pinson, 2010). Citizens also frequently approach councillors in their capacity as representative of the municipality and advocate of the community – an intervention that sometimes threatens to blur the lines with plain clientelism (Drouin, 2006). Moreover as a complement to councillors' representative task, French municipalities have started to experiment (cautiously) with participative arrangements to actively include citizens in decision-making (e.g. neighbourhood councils, advisory committees, referenda, etc.) (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005; Kerrouche, 2005; Drouin, 2006). Still it seems that these experiments have not been able to overturn what Pinson (2010: 85) calls “*the traditional mistrust of politicians towards any form of citizen participation.*” As Vetter and Kersting (2003b) point out, such hesitations seem typical for the Southern tradition of local government as such.

On the other hand, Pinson (2010) also observes a shift from input legitimacy stemming from the electoral process to output legitimacy that is founded on politicians' policy results. In fact, councillors' room for manoeuvre has been markedly enhanced by the reduced tutelage of the prefect (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005). In functional and formal terms, the local council(lor)s are entitled to handle all matters of local interest – a principle which is interpreted quite broadly (Pinson, 2010). Nevertheless in practice, it is typically the mayor that implements these competences instead of the councillors. Indeed, French local government is observed as the outstanding example of the strong-mayor type (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Kerrouche, 2005), sometimes even depicted as *municipal presidency* or *municipal monarchy* (Mabileau, 1995). The power of the mayor stems first of all from legal stipulations (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005; Kerrouche, 2005; Drouin, 2006; Knapp & Wright, 2006; Wollmann, 2008). As representative of the state and leading

⁷ An exception is made for the three largest cities Paris (163 seats), Lyon (73 seats) and Marseille (101 seats), who fall under a specific legal framework (*the PLM-Act*), and where municipal district councils seek to bridge the gap between citizens and government (www.legifrance.gouv.fr).

executive officer of the council, the mayor holds extensive responsibilities (e.g. implementation of central laws, police force, representing the municipality, implementing council decisions). Further, he/she heads and controls the local administration and the cabinet, presides over the council and sets the local agenda. The position as majority leader is strengthened even more by the electoral system in the larger municipalities and the fact that the council cannot recall the mayor. Additionally, the system of multiple office-holding ensures visibility and impact at the central level.

Informal practice further adds to this incredible position of power (Kerrouche, 2005; Drouin, 2006). Whereas council(lor)s formally elect the mayor and the executives (*adjoints*), reality works the other way around. It is the mayor who composes his/her electoral list, tying councillors hand and foot to their political leader. He/she also picks the executives who may gain considerable expertise in a certain policy field, but remain subordinate in the end – as the mayor can withdraw their portfolio at any time⁸. Sometimes competences are delegated to non-executive councillors of the majority as well (*conseillers délégués*), albeit this role is often confined to mere representational tasks. Given the strong position of the mayor, and the image of the municipality as representative of the community as a whole, the role of political parties and party politics seem inferior in the political process too (Kerrouche, 2005). Basically, this role comes down to selecting and assigning candidates for the election (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005)⁹. Finally, the mayor is paid more, is better informed and is more accessible for professionals and local interest groups. Often a notable and popular person, he/she is identified with the municipality.

According to Kerrouche (2005), such mayoral omnipresence challenges the very democratic quality of the French local system because it favours strong governance over public transparency. Meanwhile, it inevitably reduces the impact of the local councillors. According to Knapp and Wright (2006: 354), “*it is no very great exaggeration to claim that in most cases, the task of the (...) municipal councillors is to elect the (...) mayors and to ratify their decisions.*” Others agree on this marginalized position: “*the local councils have become largely sidelined, if not dwarfed, as political players*” (Wollmann, 2008: 288; see also Kerrouche, 2005). Particularly councillors from the opposition find it very hard to leave their mark on the political process, despite modest attempts to improve their position by the *proximity democracy* act in 2002 (e.g. introducing the right to inform

⁸ Executives have no personal competences, only competences delegated by the mayor. The number of executives varies between one and 30% of the council, except for municipalities with more than 80.000 inhabitants, where supplementary district executives can be appointed (up to 10% of the council) (www.legifrance.gouv.fr).

⁹ Drouin (2006) notes that political parties are more important for councillors from the opposition – as these have to organize themselves more to be able to oppose the powerful mayor.

citizens in the municipal newsletter, granting the opposition a place of their own in the town hall) (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005; Kerrouche, 2005; Drouin, 2006)¹⁰.

6.2.3. *The Netherlands*

Compared to the French system, the local system in the Netherlands follows a totally different pattern. As an example of the Northern/North-Middle European style, the purpose of Dutch local government is more functional than political, i.e. providing a wide range of public services as an integral part of the welfare state (Hesse & Sharpe, 1991; Goldsmith, 1996). In search for efficiency gains to this end, the Netherlands are characterized by an ongoing, almost yearly and centrally encouraged reduction of the municipal landscape through amalgamations (Denters & Klok, 2005; De Ceuninck et al, 2010). With an average population of 39.846, Dutch municipalities are also considerably larger than French ones. Amongst the 418 municipalities, 90.7% surpassed the 10.000-threshold in 2011. Meanwhile since the 1990s, the functional public discourse on local government has also been complemented with increasing efforts to enhance the democratic quality of local government. As a result, several forms of participatory democracy, such as referenda and advisory boards, have been introduced (Vetter & Kersting, 2003b; Denters & Klok, 2005; Boogers, 2007). Leyenaar (2007) argues nevertheless that local actors and governments should become even more aware of the democratic surplus of such processes.

Dutch councillors are elected every four years in a proportional open party list system. The councils count 9 to 45 members depending on the municipal size¹¹. Council meetings are held more frequently than in France (averagely 8 to 12 times per year), whilst almost every week a committee meeting is planned (Boogers, 2007). Given the total number of councillors (9.358 after the 2010 elections), the representative ratio in the Netherlands (1:1.780) is much larger as well. Along these lines, the governance culture in the Dutch councils is often considered to be more inward-looking and professional (Denters & De Jong, 1992; Denters & van der Kolk, 1998; Kalk & De Rynck, 2003; Denters et al., 2005). Such professionalization is fostered by the extensive functional demands for local government (Boogers, 2007). However, this functional earmark also places stress on the accountability of the local councillors towards their constituents (Denters et al., 2005).

¹⁰ In 1992, councillors from the opposition had already acquired the right to be represented in the municipal committees, the right to ask formal questions to the mayor and the right to approve an internal code of conduct for the council at the start of the legislature (Drouin, 2006).

¹¹ The two largest municipalities, Amsterdam and Rotterdam, have formal decentralized councils as well (i.e. district or borough councils).

On the organizational plan, Dutch local government differs from the French one as well. Whereas the French system is known as the strong-mayor form, the Dutch system qualifies as a collective form (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). This means that executive powers are exercised by an institutionalized collective body, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen. This collegiate body is presided over by the mayor. The latter is not an elected politician but is appointed by the Crown for six years on advice from the council (Denters et al., 2005). This system envisages a *neutral* or independent mayor who rises above the political twists in the council and acts as the ombudsman of all citizens in the municipality (Derksen, 1998). The mayor has some personal competencies (e.g. police, implementation of national laws) and presides over the council, but as an appointed administrator, he/she has no political legitimacy, hence voting rights or political role to play (Tops & Korsten, 1998)¹². The aldermen (varying from two up to 20% of the council) are elected by the council (Steen & Toonen, 2010). They formally implement the council's decisions, run the daily operation of the local system and organize the municipal administration (Denters et al., 2005). Meanwhile, the formal and ultimate primacy of the council expresses the institutionalized dominance of the layman rule over political leadership and the professional administration (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). The council is thus placed at the head of local government, representing the people while determining local policies and controlling the executive board (Denters & van der Kolk, 1998).

Nevertheless, over time a strong discrepancy has grown between these formal stipulations and daily practice (Denters & van der Kolk, 1998; Denters et al., 2005; Steen & Wille, 2005). In fact, the monistic system, in which aldermen were elected (and potentially recalled) by and from the council whilst retaining a seat in the council and the committees, has turned the power relations upside down. Formally, the executive was designed to prepare and implement council decisions, organize the administration and run daily affairs under the council's direction and control. Yet in practice, the BMA overtook the council as the dominant actor in local government. Aldermen have monopolized their policy field, working in close harmony with the administrative department to implement an ever expanding task package. They have held the final say in their party group as well. The latter, and party politics generally, are indeed an important facet of Dutch democracy (Denters & van der Kolk, 1998; Denters et al., 2005; Boogers, 2007; Denters et al., 2011). For the amateur, non-executive councillors, it used to be very hard to oppose this all-embracing executive supremacy, particularly in a context of expanding municipal tasks, increasing municipal size and growing social and political complexity (Denters et al., 2005). Accordingly: *“the prime role in the policy process of amateur part-time*

¹² In the executive body, the mayor has a voting right *“in the event of a tie”* (Steen & Toonen, 2010: 146).

councillors both in policy development and in policy implementation [was] largely illusory” (Denters et al., 2005: 20).

In 2002, the introduction of the *Dualism Act* entailed a drastic institutional revolution which aimed at reversing this established informal practice (Denters et al., 2005 and 2008; Steen & Wille, 2005; Boogers, 2007; Steen & Toonen, 2010). Dualism radically separated the executive board and the council in personal and functional terms. It transferred all the administrative powers and responsibilities to the BMA. The council, on the other hand, is still entitled to elect and recall the aldermen, but not necessarily from amongst its ranks any longer¹³. Aldermen automatically lose their seat and vote in the council, committees and often even the party group. Additionally, the *Dualism Act* aimed to strengthen the position of the local councillors as (a) representative of their locality in policy matters (i.e. adopting a more outward-looking orientation as representative of the locality) and (b) scrutinizer of the BMA. To that end the act has made new instruments available at the council’s disposal (e.g. a clerk for administrative support; an audit court; annual citizen reports; agenda setting, information, inquiry and interpellation rights). These instruments are also intended to reduce the need for professionalized councillors in local government.

At present, it might still be too early to draw unanimous conclusions from the reform. On one hand, it seems that local councillors’ self-awareness and position vis-à-vis the executive in terms of policy and control has indeed been reinvigorated (Denters et al., 2008; De Groot et al., 2010). Yet simultaneously, some authors describe the new relations within Dutch local government as *duelism* between the council and the executive, rather than the *dualism* called for (Steen & Wille, 2005; Steen & Toonen, 2010). Effects on the input side of local government are less pronounced too (Denters et al., 2008; De Groot et al., 2010).

6.2.4. Belgium

Belgium completes our international comparative research framework. The typical (i.e. unitary) Belgian system has long been considered a mixture between the systems of its neighbours the Netherlands and France. Like France, Belgium is traditionally seen as an example of the South European/Franco type (Goldsmith, 1996; De Ceuninck et al, 2010; Wayenberg et al., 2010). Municipalities thus rather express the communal identity of their citizens than functionally providing public services for them in the most optimal

¹³ According to Denters et al. (2005), this could invoke more professionalism in the local system because it could create a national group of political managers who systematically aspire to these executive functions.

way. Considering its small size, Belgium counts relatively many (589) and small municipalities (average size 18.404, still with 59.1% exceeding the 10.000-threshold). And in order to meet the growing public service demands, municipalities prefer to engage in a booming network of inter-municipal cooperation(s) (Plees, 2005; De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010).

Belgian local councillors are elected every six years in a proportional free list system¹⁴. Councils are obliged to meet at least 10 times per year, and their composition varies from 7 members to 55 depending on the municipal size¹⁵. Standing committees are installed in about half of the municipalities (Ackaert, 2005). In the 2006 elections, 13.281 councillors were elected. This means that the representative ratio in Belgium is rather small too (1:797). What Belgian councillors further have in common with French councillors is their close bond with local society (Plees, 2005). Such outward-oriented attitude distinguishes them from (the typical image of) Dutch councillors (Kalk & De Rynck, 2003). Nevertheless over the recent decades, scholars also notice a growing professionalization of the Belgian local office in order to meet the growing functional requirements for local government (Reynaert et al., 2006; Verhelst et al., *forthcoming*).

Regarding its internal organization, however, Belgian local government bears more similarities with the Dutch (pre 2002) system. Indeed, Belgium is placed under the header of the collective form as well (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). Formally, the council is the heart of local government (Ackaert, 2005). It holds responsibility for all matters of municipal interest, steering the actions of the executive board and the administration. The council elects the aldermen, who constitute the Board of Mayor and Aldermen¹⁶. The main role of the BMA is to run the municipality as a collegiate body, and execute policy proposals under supervision of the council. It is presided over by the mayor. In the unitary system, the latter was nominated by the council from its ranks and officially appointed by central government (even though this appointment was usually just a formality, see Pilet et al., 2005). Unlike his/her Dutch colleague, the Belgian mayor is thus an elected politician, and probably even the most important one in the city hall

¹⁴ In an *open* list system, citizens can only cast their vote for (an) individual candidate(s) on a party list. In a *free* list system (e.g. Belgium), citizens can vote for the party, as well as for single candidates on a party list (if *panachage* is not allowed, like in Belgium, citizens can only vote for candidates of the particular party they voted for). In a *closed* list system, citizens can only cast their vote for a party (Van der Kolk, 2007).

¹⁵ Belgium's largest municipality Antwerp has also formal district councils.

¹⁶ The BMA counts two to ten members, plus the president of the *Public Social Services Centre* and the mayor. In Wallonia, the executive board is called the *Municipal College*.

(Ackaert, 2005). He/she is the leader of the political majority and has some additional competences as well (e.g. police, implementation of central laws)¹⁷.

Yet on the other hand, the Dutch (pre 2002) anomaly is reproduced in the Belgian scene in practice too (Ackaert, 2005; De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; Verhelst et al., 2011). Policy domains are *de facto* distributed personally amongst the aldermen, who usually belong to (a party of) the political majority. These aldermen steer the administrative department of the policy domain in their portfolio and define local policies together with the mayor and the municipal CEO. Additionally, the executive politicians outweigh non-executive councillors in the council, committees and the party group. The culture of strong party influence and discipline, respect for the authorities and executive dominance seems even stronger than in the Netherlands, rendering council meetings mere *formalized pieces of cabaret* (Kalk & De Rynck, 2003; also Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). In sum: “Party loyalty and discipline, the growing complexity of local administration and policy, combined with the lack of organizational and financial support needed for policymaking (...) put the council in a weak position relative to the board” (Ackaert, 2005: 169; see also De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; Wayenberg et al., 2010; Verhelst et al., 2011).

The largest transformation of the Belgian local system was carried out by the fifth state reform (2001), granting the regions Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital the responsibility over the constitutive framework on local government from 2002 onwards. As stated in the introduction, this transfer formalized the claim that two diverging local systems have emerged in Belgium (Goldsmith, 1996; Steyvers, 2006; Steyvers, 2010a). Whereas Wallonia would resemble the typical Franco-system, Flanders would seem to be drifting towards the North-Middle European, efficiency-oriented style of its Dutch neighbour (De Ceuninck et al., 2005; Block et al., 2007; De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010).

At least in formal terms, some differences exist between Flanders and Wallonia with regard to their local system. Flemish municipalities (average size 20.299, 72.1% above 10.000, ratio 1:830) are for instance larger on average than their Walloon counterparts (average size 13.353, 40.8% above 10.000, ratio 1:655). Nevertheless also in Flanders, no new amalgamations were carried out since the last general (and federal) round of 1976-1982. Rather, and despite the encouragement from central government to increase municipal size and efficiency, Belgian municipalities still prefer to join the rich tapestry of inter-municipal cooperation(s). Like in France, the extensive practice of multiple office-holding, which results in a central (i.e. regional) parliament studded with local (mostly executive) politicians, is one of the main reasons for this (De Ceuninck et al., 2010). On the other hand, the Flemish *Municipal Decree* clearly centres more around the

¹⁷ Only exceptionally, the mayor is not an elected councillor or the leader of the political majority. Like in France, he/she is often the most well-known figure in the municipality (see *Chapter 1*).

Northern NPM-style, stressing professionalization, efficiency, functional capacity and management (e.g. introducing strategic planning, a management team, financial planning, public-private partnerships, municipal agencies, auditing, etc.) (Ackaert, 2005; De Ceuninck et al., 2005; Wayenberg et al., 2010). The typical primacy of politics remains more prevalent in Wallonia (Pilet, 2008; Wayenberg et al., 2010).

Both regions introduced different political renovations as well¹⁸. As a result of a series of political scandals at the local level, the Walloon *Code* has placed more emphasis on democratic requirements (Pilet, 2008). For instance, Walloon councils got empowered with a constructive motion of distrust against (a member of, or the entire) BMA. Walloon councillors can thus recall the aldermen and/or mayor as long as a majority agrees on (a) replacement(s). Furthermore, the semi-direct election of the mayor was introduced simultaneously. This implies that the candidate who obtains most preferential votes for the biggest party of the municipal majority, is automatically appointed as mayor (Pilet et al., 2007b). Such a system could pave the way towards a stronger position of the mayor in practice, tending towards the French Southern, quasi-presidential governance culture (Pilet, 2008). The Flemish decree did foresee some new arrangements as well, such as the possibility to support the party groups in the council, additional delegation and information rights for councillors and the option to elect a genuine council president (instead of the mayor who automatically presided over the council before). Still, despite a lively debate on the direct election of the mayor, the Flemish decree did not alter the designation of the most important political office in the municipality (Reynaert & Steyvers, 2006; Wayenberg et al., 2010).

On the other hand, the democratic earmark of the Walloon *Code* is not reflected in a fundamental improvement of participatory democracy. Whereas the Walloon *Code* adheres more to traditional, consultative ways of citizen participation in the political process (e.g. advisory bodies and referenda, citizen appeals in the council), it is the Flemish decree that introduced more active possibilities such as citizen initiatives or participatory budgeting (Wayenberg et al., 2010 – still, see footnote 18). We could interpret this as a sign of the typical Southern reticence towards actively involving citizens in decision-making (Vetter & Kersting, 2003b). Nonetheless, scholars notice that local politicians on both sides of the language border remain quite sceptic about the value of these possibilities (Pilet et al., 2007d; Wayenberg et al., 2010). Finally, it is remarkable that no region has opted to give councillors a genuine statute (De Rynck & Wayenberg 2010; Wayenberg et al., 2010). Hence, generally, it still looks like “*the dominance of the political executive in local politics remains the corner stone of Belgian local democracy*” (Wayenberg et al., 2010: 87).

¹⁸ Even though recent reforms have started to level out some of these differences, see *Chapter 1*.

6.3. DATA AND METHODS

To what extent do councillors from Flanders, Wallonia, the Netherlands and France feel that their current role and position in the political system diverge, converge or reflect a path-dependent legacy? We will search for an answer to this question by interpreting cross-sectional empirical data that have been collected in the context of the European comparative research project *Municipal Assemblies in European Local Governance* (see Egner et al., *forthcoming*)¹⁹. The goal of this project was to systematically and comparatively investigate local councillors in Europe – as this group was often neglected in political research until recently (see Egner et al., *forthcoming* in general; Drouin, 2006 for France; Reynaert et al., 2006 for Belgium; Denters et al., 2011 for the Netherlands). In each participating country a standard questionnaire was sent to a selection of local councillors by a team of national scholars during the period 2007-2009. Our country and case selection from the project for this study constitutes a comparative design that triangulates a *most different* approach with a *most-similar* complement (Landman, 2008).

First, the country descriptions have shown that the reference countries France and the Netherlands (theoretically) represent two opposing systems in terms of the formal local government system (i.e. *most different*)²⁰. Meanwhile, the typical unitary Belgian system combines elements of both referential systems (i.e. *most similar* in certain domains). The basic elements of this framework are summarized in Table 6.1 below.

¹⁹ The cross-sectional design of the study does not allow us to verify the basic research hypotheses in a longitudinal way.

²⁰ Even though some trends and reforms could have reduced these differences.

Table 6.1. The formal comparative research framework

	<i>France</i>	<i>the Netherlands</i>	<i>Belgium</i>
Local government type	Franco	North-Middle Europe	Franco
Raison d'être local government	More political	More functional	More political
Local government organization	Strong-mayor	Collective	Collective
N municipalities	36.700	418	589
Average population	1.757	39.846	18.404
Municipalities > 10.000	2.6%	90.7%	59.1%
N councillors (last elections)	519.417	9.358	13.281
Term length	6 years	4 years	6 years
N council meetings	Once/trimester	8-12 times/year	10 times/year
Representative ratio	1:124	1:1.780	1:797
N councillors per council	9-69	9-45	7-55
N executives per council	1-30% council	2-20% council	2-10
Mayor	Elected by & from council	Appointed by Crown (on advice council)	Semi-dir. elected/ proposed by & from council, centrally appointed

Second, our research subjects within these countries are *most similar* to each other. In fact, the *MAELG* group confined the scope of the research-project to the local councillors from an urban context in order to maximize the comparability of the data. Consequently, the project covered municipalities with at least 10.000 inhabitants only. This choice obviously excludes the singularity of small-town councillors in our analysis and conclusions – thus, for instance, a large share of the French municipal landscape. Nevertheless, the size threshold seems justified in our research context as the discussion on the possible strain on municipal councillors is (claimed to be) particularly high in the urban political system – where there are more professional executives and administrations, intricate governance networks and different actors involved in policy-making, a higher workload, etc. (Gabriel et al., 2000; Haus et al., 2005; Drouin, 2006; Reynaert & Steyvers, 2006). Furthermore, we only use data from local councillors who were not members of the executive board at the moment of response. Indeed, given the dualistic structure of its local system, executive councillors were not surveyed in the Netherlands. Yet also on this point literature expects that functional problems regarding councillors' roles and positions would particularly arise among the non-executive part of the local councillor population (Berg & Rao, 2005; Larsen, 2005).

The survey procedure of the *MAELG* project and our purposive case selection has resulted in a total research population of 2007 single cases (441 French councillors, 1121 Dutch councillors and 445 Belgian councillors, of which 344 Flemish and 101 Walloon

councillors)²¹. The structural figures for this population show that even if the size threshold diminishes the inter-country variance to a considerable extent, the ratio's between the countries under study still persist. Also in our uniform *urban* research data set, Dutch councillors (average municipal size 51.718, representative ratio 1:1.736) represent a larger hinterland than French councillors (average size 28.784, representative ratio 1:735). Belgium holds the middle between both, whilst the distance between Walloon councillors and their citizens (average size 27.408, representative ratio 1:879) is smaller than in Flanders (average size 33.804, representative ratio 1:1.000).

The questionnaire comprises 5 parts: (a) questions about the council and the actors in local democracy, (b) questions about the role as a councillor, (c) questions about the view on local democracy and local policy, (d) questions about the political career and political party and (e) questions about the (personal) background. From these five parts we have been able to extract different aspects of councillors' roles and positions for our analysis. These aspects are: the recruitment process to the council, councillors' orientation towards their classic role-set (combining role attitude and role behaviour), councillors' self-placement in the local hierarchy, councillors' relation with the citizens (in the representative and participatory setting) and councillors' political ambitions for the future and possible turnover motives.

Per aspect, we have systematically compared the results from the French, Dutch, Flemish and Walloon respondents. The standardized survey method (each question was asked, measured and coded in the same way in every country) allows us to quantify the differences and similarities between the countries/regions and test our general research hypotheses. More specifically, a bivariate table presents the figure of the total research population per research theme, as well as the figure for the four councillor groups²². The general figure in the table is calculated on the basis of weighted response in order to guarantee that each country and region is represented by an equal share of respondents. The table further presents the difference between the figure per country/region and this general figure. The final column of the table reports on the significance and strength of the difference between the four countries/regions under study. The latter is expressed by the Cramer's V-value²³.

²¹ The respective response rates for the countries are 38.6% (the Netherlands), 22.4% (Belgium) and 12.1% (France).

²² Graphical presentations of the comparative results are also added in Appendix F.

²³ Cramer's V is frequently used to interpret the strength of the association between variables with more than two categories that are measured at the nominal or ordinal level (George & Mallery, 2010). Values between .01 and .09 indicate that the difference between the regions/countries for the variable under study is just 'trivial'. From .10 to .29, the strength of this difference is 'low' to 'moderate', whilst scores from .30 to .49 indicate that the difference between the regions/countries is 'moderate' to 'substantial' (de Vaus, 2002).

6.4. THE PROCESS OF POLITICAL RECRUITMENT TO THE COUNCIL

The first part of our analysis is concerned with councillors' political recruitment, defined as "*the process by which individuals are selected for inclusion among political elites*" (Brady et al., 1999: 153). Political studies have frequently shown that representative assemblies seldom mirror their community at large (Judge, 1999). The path to the council is thus far from neutral. In recent decades, the selectivity in recruitment has been identified as a tendency towards professionalization (Steyvers & Verhelst, 2012). Professionalization refers to (a) the growing importance of particular personal characteristics (i.e. a higher education, selective professional background and an advantageous period in one's life), but also (b) councillors' inclusion in the party machinery (ranging from the motivation to serve the party to the actual support in the election). These area-specific assets and routines gain importance in the selection process because they fuel the expectation of empowering councillors in an increasingly complex and demanding office. Accordingly, professional(ized) councillors could be better suited to administer local affairs and stand their ground against other influential actors in governance (e.g. the mayor, aldermen, administration, etc.). However on the other hand, it is often argued that the professionalization trend contradicts the principle of layman politics. It reduces the intake of *average* or common citizens who are mandated by their peers to represent the common public views in the political arena (Denters & Klok, 2005). Professionalization's political component could lay the foundations of stringent party discipline in the council as well. Simultaneously, some trends are also perceived to democratize the councils to some extent (Steyvers & Verhelst, 2012). The feminization of the councils, in some countries triggered by official gender quota (e.g. France and Belgium), and the increase of councillors with foreign roots, are two examples of contemporary evolutions that could compensate for ancient and modern recruitment bias.

Table 6.2 reconstructs the recruitment process of our respondents in four elementary phases (see e.g. Norris, 1997): (a) the social base (% councillors with a higher education, a selective profession before their first office, middle-aged at the start of the first office, female councillors, councillors with foreign roots), (b) political motivations (the lay motivations 'citizen duty' and 'highlight the needs of a particular group' versus the professional motives 'party duty' and 'enter on a political career')²⁴, (c) apprenticeships (% members of a local association, members of a political party before the first office) and (d) the election (support from local associations, support from the local party, elected on a national party list). For each stage a distinction is drawn between the professional pole and its layman pendant.

²⁴ Expressed by the percentage of respondents who indicated that the motive was 'of great or utmost importance' when they first accepted to become a candidate.

- According to the path-dependent hypothesis, we could expect a higher degree of *democratization* in local systems that are mainly founded on *communitarianism* and have, for instance, installed formal gender quota (i.e. France and the Belgian regions). Personal *professionalization* would be more notable in systems that are more inward-looking, placing more stress on the functional earmark of local government (i.e. the Netherlands). The impact of parties would be reflected in the degree of political professionalization in recruitment as well (i.e. prevailing in the Netherlands and the Belgian regions).
- The divergence hypothesis implies that Flanders would bear more similarities to the Dutch system in terms of personal professionalization, considering its stronger emphasis on functional and professional local government.
- Finally, the convergence hypothesis expects that the typical difference(s) between the four countries/regions would diminish. Due to the growing complexity of local government across Europe, professionalization would then characterize councillors' recruitment process across the four countries/regions.

Table 6.2. The political recruitment process of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France (in percentages)

	<i>General</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Cramer's V^(a)</i>
<i>Social Base</i>						
Higher education (N=1989)	66.2	66.9 (+0.7)	66.9 (+0.7)	61 (-5.2)	69.8 (+3.6)	.07
Selective profession (N=1810)	44.5	49.8 (+5.3)	34.6 (-9.9)	47.3 (+2.8)	46 (+1.5)	.12
Middle-aged (40-59 years) (N=1932)	53.1	65 (+11.9)	44 (-9.1)	49.5 (-3.6)	54.7 (+1.6)	.15
Female councillors (N=1991)	32	27 (-5)	29.5 (-2.5)	23.9 (-8.1)	47.2 (+15.2)	.20
Foreign roots (N=1970)	12.4	8.4 (-4)	7.2 (-5.2)	14.4 (+2)	19.6 (+7.2)	.15
<i>Political Motivation</i>						
Citizen duty (N=1958)	47.8	43.8 (-4)	28.6 (-19.2)	61.6 (+13.8)	58.2 (+10.4)	.23
Highlights needs of particular group (N=1914)	54.1	48.7 (-5.4)	68 (+13.9)	62.2 (+8.1)	34.6 (-19.5)	.19
Party duty (N=1914)	49.1	62.7 (+13.6)	45.9 (-3.2)	57.1 (+8)	28.2 (-20.9)	.29
Enter on a political career (N=1928)	8.8	8.8 (=)	12.2 (+3.4)	4.1 (-4.7)	9.7 (+0.9)	.10
<i>Apprenticeships</i>						
Member local association(s) (N=1941)	98	98 (=)	97.6 (-0.4)	97 (-1)	99.3 (+1.3)	.08
Member political party before mandate (N=1843)	77.2	97.8 (+20.6)	76.6 (-0.6)	84.6 (+7.4)	47.3 (-29.9)	.32
<i>Election</i>						
(Very) strong support local association(s) (N=1905)	18.5	18.3 (-0.2)	19 (+0.5)	11.3 (-7.2)	26.1 (+7.6)	.14
(Very) strong support local party (N=1920)	68.4	85.2 (+16.8)	71.9 (+3.5)	65.3 (-3.1)	48.7 (-19.7)	.25
Elected on a list of a national party (N=1978)	65.8	74.7 (+8.9)	82.1 (+16.3)	75.8 (+10)	29.6 (-36.2)	.31

(a) All associations are significant at the .05 level

Table 6.2 shows that the recruitment process of French, Dutch and Belgian councillors combines convergent, divergent and path-dependent patterns. Based on the weak reciprocal differences, we can conclude that personal professionalization occurs in all countries/regions under study. Nearly half of the respondents boast a selective social background in terms of starting age, profession at the start of the first mandate (i.e. professional politician, civil servant, business manager, teacher, liberal profession) and particularly education. This suggests that the recruitment process advantages candidates with the necessary capacities to administer local affairs indeed – even though the degree of personal professionalization is slightly weaker in the Belgian regions than in the Netherlands, for instance. The two other convergent patterns in the table are typical of layman politics. In each country/region, no more than a small minority of the councillors entered the council with a clear professional career plan in mind. Further and regardless of the local context, a councillor is nearly always recruited from the organized local community, i.e. being member of at least one association.

From here on, the differences between the regions/countries enlarge, particularly in terms of the impact of political parties in recruitment. The results from the French and Dutch councillors basically reflect the path-dependent legacy of their local systems. Whereas the recruitment process of the former leans most towards the lay model, the latter take a far more selective and professionalized route to the council in personal and political terms. In France, gender quota have almost placed female councillors on equal terms whilst the proportion of councillors with foreign roots (i.e. born, or having parent(s) born abroad) is twice as large as in the Netherlands. French councillors were also more inspired by citizen duty, conceiving their mandate as a service to the community. Particularistic needs and party duty mattered less. The ranking of the motivations in the Dutch system is reversed, showing more signs of professionalization. The particular importance of the political party in the recruitment process recurs in the near unanimity with which Dutch councillors are recruited, supported and elected as party members. Such a pattern is less common in France, where we find more independents/candidates from local lists (i.e. councillors that were not elected on a list of a national party), and the role of local associations in the electoral process is more important from a comparative viewpoint.

The results from the Belgian respondents combine elements of their path-dependent legacy with some divergent nuances. Both Flanders and Wallonia still have some work ahead regarding the democratization of their councils in descriptive terms, despite the introduction of formal gender quota and some differences between the regions. As expected, parties keep a tight grip on the recruitment process of both groups as well. In Wallonia this is somewhat more apparent during the apprenticeship phase, in Flanders it occurs more during the election afterwards. Yet it is particularly the motivational pattern

that diverges most between the regions. Citizen duty, service to a particular group and party duty were nearly equally important for local councillors in Wallonia. For Flemish councillors, citizen duty and party duty mattered seemingly less when they decided to stand for office. Particularly the opportunity to highlight the needs of a specific group tops their list of political motivations. Moreover, the professional motive to develop a political career was more important in Flanders as well. Still generally, the regions do not seem to systematically resemble their reference country as expected by the diverging hypothesis.

6.5. ROLE ORIENTATION

Once installed in office, councillors ought to assume their role as protagonists of local democracy. Their formal and classic role-set comprises three components (De Rynck, 2000; Denters et al., 2008). As elected citizens, councillors should represent the interests, requests and issues from local society in the political arena. Complementary to this input role, they are expected to define the main goals of municipal policy whilst scrutinizing its implementation afterwards on the output side of the political system. This ideal-typical role-set, however, does not exclusively direct councillors' actions in practice. Indeed in office, the party (group) tends to serve as a major focus of representation and action as well (Judge, 1999; Copus, 2004). For this reason we include the implementation of the party (or political movement) program as a fourth part of the councillor role-set.

The empirical analysis seeks to grasp councillors' role orientation on two levels. First, it addresses the importance attached to the four components of the role-set (i.e. the *attitudinal level*). Subsequently, councillors rate their contribution to the same items (i.e. the *behavioural level*). Scores varied from 0 (no importance/contribution) to 4 (very high importance/contribution). For each item Table 6.3 presents the percentages (very) high importance/contribution.

- The path-dependent hypothesis implies that the representative role would prevail in the local systems of the Franco type (i.e. France and Belgium), since these are basically conceived as the expression of a place-bound local identity. Local systems of the North-Middle European type (i.e. the Netherlands), that place more emphasis on the functional side of local government, would require more administrative output roles. Party politics, an influential but invisible factor in some systems, would particularly guide the actions of the local councillors in Belgium and the Netherlands.
- The divergence hypothesis, on the other hand, suggests that the Flemish governance culture shifts towards the Dutch model, and Flemish councillors would thus display a

more output oriented and functional role orientation than their colleagues in Wallonia. The role orientation of the latter would remain similar to the French (and former Belgian) style.

- Finally, according to the convergence hypothesis, the mutual differences between the countries would decline due to the compelling and universal claims for local government to maximize both its democratic and functional capacity. Councillors would consequently try to fulfil representation, policy *and* control in the best possible way. Meanwhile, the professionalization of the local office could also enhance the impact of political parties across the political systems.

Table 6.3. Role orientation of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France (percent (very) high importance/contribution)

	<i>General</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Cramer's V^(a)</i>
<i>Role attitude</i>						
Representation (N=1968)	87.5	84.4 (-3.1)	87.2 (-0.3)	87.6 (+0.1)	91.2 (+3.7)	.08
Policy (N=1964)	81.1	96.6 (+15.5)	77.3 (-3.8)	68.4 (-12.7)	82 (+0.9)	.21
Control (N=1966)	77.6	91 (+13.4)	81.1 (+3.5)	71.4 (-6.2)	66.4 (-11.2)	.16
Party program (N=1954)	60.4	71.5 (+11.1)	66.8 (+6.4)	68.4 (+8)	33.7 (-26.7)	.29
<i>Role behaviour</i>						
Representation (N=1982)	60.7	50.1 (-10.6)	63.2 (+2.5)	59.1 (-1.6)	70.9 (+10.2)	.11
Policy (N=1977)	40	52 (+12)	22.7 (-17.3)	29.7 (-10.3)	55.7 (+15.7)	.21
Control (N=1979)	44.9	49.7 (+4.8)	43.3 (-1.6)	41.1 (-3.8)	45.5 (+0.6)	.13
Party program (N=1964)	44	49.9 (+5.9)	54.7 (+10.7)	41.5 (-2.5)	28.8 (-15.2)	.28

(a) All associations are significant at the .05 level

The analysis of councillors' role orientation yields a compound conclusion as well. Two general converging patterns come to the fore. First, at the attitudinal level, almost every councillor acknowledges that he/she should represent the requests and issues from the locality in the political arena. Additionally, a large majority of the councillor population supports the output roles of their classic role-set as well. Hence, councillors do not

distinguish systematically between representation on the input side of their mandate and policy/control on the output side. They are convinced of their privileged task as link between citizens and government on the one hand, and central actors inside the political system on the other. The second convergent pattern is less optimistic though. A large portion of the councillors feel that their room for manoeuvre within the contours of this classic role-set is quite strongly curtailed in practice. Indeed, at the behavioural level, the percentage of respondents who indicate to contribute (very) much to the classic roles drops with 20-50% compared to the initial role attitude in each country/region under study. The discrepancy between the role attitude and role behaviour in terms of the implementation of the party program is less pronounced.

The nuances below this surface, however, show apparent signs of the acclaimed path-dependent legacy of each local system. The strongest and most eye-catching figure underlines the importance of political parties in the Netherlands and Belgium, whilst the implementation of the party (or political movement) program is only important for a minority of the councillors in France – just as the party was less important in the route to their office on beforehand. Besides, the contrasting *raison d'être* of French and Dutch local government is reflected (to some extent) in the role orientation of their councillors as well. The analysis shows that French councillors put most emphasis on representation, even though they consider policy-making to be an integral part of their job too. Policy control is ranked third. On the behavioural level, this order is even more pronounced. It confirms the claim that the representational role of French municipalities traditionally outweighs its functional counterpart – as the impact of the councillors on the output side of the system is largely contained by the mayor anyway. We find a different picture in the Netherlands. Albeit councillors rate all three classic roles very high, the overall balance leans slightly more towards the output side, and policy-making in particular. This complies with the rationale of Dutch local government as a functional service provider, and the councillor as its main governor. Nevertheless, this nuance fades away in councillors' perceived behaviour, where the Dutch role system turns out to be the most balanced one. Dutch councillors claim to contribute to every role equally.

For Belgium, we find a different pattern on the attitudinal and behavioural level. The hypothesis that Flanders diverges from Wallonia through the adaptation of a more output directed and management-oriented governance style applies to councillors' role attitude only, and just to a certain extent. Flemish councillors indeed pay more importance to the output roles policy and control than Walloon councillors. Still in both regions, representation remains the main focus for the local councillors. Furthermore, Flemish councillors do not claim to behave much differently from Walloon councillors in practice. In both regions, councillors' main contribution to the local system lies in representing the issues and needs from their community. Such blueprint is typical for

countries of the Franco type. Additionally, both Flemish and Walloon councillors fail to exert a strong influence on municipal affairs, particularly in terms of local policy definition. Given the proportion of councillors that claim to contribute highly to the output roles, we might even conclude that the strain on non-executive councillors is stronger in Belgium than in the Dutch or French system. Lastly, the implementation of the party program appears slightly more important in Flanders than in Wallonia.

6.6. THE CLASSIC POWER TRIANGLE: COUNCILLORS' SELF-PLACEMENT IN THE LOCAL AUTHORITY

How do councillors assess their influence in the local authority? Probably, councillors' self-placement in the local hierarchy provides the most direct indication of their position in the political system within the reach of our survey analysis. To operationalize this question, we have built on the work of Mouritzen and Svava (2002). According to these authors, the internal organization of the local system takes shape through the structural relation of three universal principles: the *layman rule* (i.e. the effective and intensive involvement of elected citizens in decision-making), *political leadership* (i.e. the political steering and inspiration of government) and *professionalism* (i.e. the expertise and strategic thinking in/of the administration). In our research design, each point of the power triangle is represented by two items: single councillors and the party groups in the council (i.e. the layman rule); the mayor and the executive board (i.e. political leadership); the secretary/municipal chief executive officer (CEO) and the heads of department in the municipality (i.e. professionalism). We asked our respondents to rate the influence of these six actors, independent from the formal procedures in the system, on a scale from 0 (no influence) to 4 (very high influence). Table 6.4 shows the proportion of respondents that perceive the influence of the actors as (very) high.

- Our path-dependent hypothesis would label France as the eminent example of the strong-mayor type. In such a system, the power balance is in favour of the mayor to the detriment of the other actors. The Netherlands and Belgium are (theoretically) characterized as a collective type of government in which executive powers are shared between the mayor and the executive board. Meanwhile, the layman rule takes a prominent place in the local constellation and parties play an important role in supporting these laymen. The functional earmark of Dutch municipalities could result in a stronger position of the professional administrative branch in local government too. The typical political primacy of the Franco countries (i.e. France and Belgium) would render their administrative branch more subordinate.

- On the other hand, if the divergence hypothesis comes closest to the empirical reality, the Flemish system should lean more towards the Dutch collective and functional system (i.e. incorporating the collective type with a stronger impact of professionalism too) whilst Wallonia would have more in common with the French point of reference (i.e. with a stronger personal dominance of the quasi-presidential mayor and a more subordinate position of the professional administration).
- Lastly, the dominant governance culture could bear out to support the convergence hypothesis as well. This would imply that non-executive councillors hold a subordinate position across the different local systems under study. In the complex context of twenty-first century government, strong political leadership and a professionalized administration would then be indispensable to effectively and efficiently manage local affairs.

Table 6.4. Councillors' perception of the influence of local government actors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France (percent (very) high influence)

	<i>General</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Cramer's V^(a)</i>
Mayor (N=1985)	84.6	60.3 (-24.3)	91.6 (+7)	88.9 (+4.3)	98 (+13.4)	.34
Executive board (N=1951)	77.4	94.6 (+17.2)	93.6 (+16.2)	84.6 (+7.2)	34.2 (-43.2)	.39
CEO (N=1961)	57	49.8 (-7.2)	67.2 (+10.2)	51 (-6)	59.8 (+2.8)	.13
Heads of department (N=1949)	40.1	54.8 (+14.7)	43.3 (+3.2)	25.3 (-14.8)	36.1 (-4)	.15
Single councillors (N=1968)	17.3	36.9 (+19.6)	5.3 (-12)	10.2 (-7.1)	16.3 (-1)	.26
Party groups (N=1947)	34.9	72.3 (+37.4)	15.7 (-19.2)	32.7 (-2.2)	17 (-17.9)	.31

(a) All associations are significant at the .05 level

From Table 6.4 we can infer two broad convergent patterns in the internal organization of the political systems again. First, on the most general level, the principle of political leadership clearly outweighs professionalism and the layman rule in the city hall, even in those countries that are formally organized on a different footing. Second, the position of

single councillors poses most problems, as they come across as the weakest actors in the local authority by far. In France, the Netherlands, Wallonia *and* Flanders, only a minority of the non-executive councillors feel empowered to exert real influence as *individual* actors.

Still based on these broad patterns, it would be premature to place the position of the local councillors in France, the Netherlands and Belgium on the same level. Indeed, if we look at the further inter and intra-country differences, the local hierarchies exhibit clear and strong patterns of path-dependency again. France and the Netherlands largely correspond to the theoretical picture painted at the outset. For France, the results confirm the classic stereotype of municipalities that are headed, even dominated, by a strong mayor. According to the councillors, the latter overshadows all other actors in local government. The CEO ranks second but in practice, he/she tends to work in close harmony with the *municipal monarch* too. The impact of the executive board and the heads of department is less pronounced, but still considered as high by one third of the councillors (and also these collective bodies fall under the auspices of the mayor). Local councillors turn out to be the main victims of this system. They feel as if they are minor players in the local authority, both on the individual plan and in the collective sphere of the party group. In the Netherlands, we find the most equilibrated local system again. Results validate the Dutch system in its conception as an entity of collective decision-making. If the French political and administrative leaders outweigh their collective counterparts, the latter are deemed more influential in the Dutch power triangle. The executive board is the most powerful actor according to the majority of the councillors, but not in an all-embracing way. The mayor, who is not an elected politician, seems less dominant than in the other countries. Furthermore, the most striking result is the perceived influence of the local councillors. Particularly in the ranks of their party group, Dutch councillors feel that they can gain control over local affairs. The layman rule even exceeds professionalism in terms of the acclaimed influence in the local authority. For single councillors this is less the case. Still even here, Dutch councillors are far more optimistic about their individual impact than councillors from France and Belgium. Finally, the functional device of local government in the Netherlands does not seem to grant excessive powers to its administrative branch – even though half of the Dutch councillors reckon that the municipal CEO and the heads of department have (very) much influence in the local system.

The results for the Belgian system are remarkable too. Despite the formal conception of Belgian local government as a collective form based on the layman rule, non-executive councillors feel outplayed by the political leaders on the local stage. This anomaly arises both in Flanders and Wallonia, reflecting their common Belgian legacy. In fact, councillors feel that both the mayor and the executive board have the strongest say in

local government on both sides of the language border. The professional branch of local government comes next in the power hierarchy. Particularly the CEO is often considered as an important figure in the municipality. The most striking corollary is found in the devaluation of the council, and the single councillors in particular. In Belgium, the latter appear to be side-lined even more than in France – a system that seems explicitly designed to produce a strong mayor (see Kerrouche, 2005). On the other hand, we do perceive some divergence between the regions within this broad picture as well. In Flanders, the anomaly of the inverted power relation seems even worse than in Wallonia. Walloon councillors, for instance, estimate the power of political leadership (slightly) less overwhelming than Flemish councillors. Accordingly, the Walloon system seems not quasi-presidential, even though councillors in Wallonia are more inclined to think that the mayor dominates the executive. Furthermore, single councillors and, above all, the party groups are deemed more influential in Wallonia. We could interpret this as a signal of stronger political primacy. It is also likely that councillors' constructive motion of distrust, which Flemish councillors have to do without, proves an effective instrument for that purpose. The Flemish system, on the other hand, exhibits more signs of a functional culture, underpinned by the stronger impact of the professional administrative branch.

6.7. COUNCILLORS, CITIZENS AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The next part of our analysis tackles the relation between councillors and citizens. On the most formal level, this relation is evaluated over a fixed period of time via free and democratic elections. Through these elections citizens pass their authority on to a selection of commons who will run the municipality on their behalf. Yet more and more the awareness has grown that these elected representatives should also carefully maintain their relation with the citizens throughout the legislature (Alonso et al., 2011). Consequently, councillors should constantly inform and communicate with the locality during their time in office (Klausen & Sweeting, 2005; Benz & Papadopoulos, 2006). Such contacts would, then, provide the opportunity for councillors to pick up input from the community. They are also the perfect opportunity to give feedback of local policies to the citizens. Over and above the typical relation between citizens and councillors in this representative setting, many local democracies seek for new and stronger ways to actively involve citizens in the political system in order to enhance its democratic quality (Daemen & Schaap, 2000; Delwit et al., 2007). Many authors believe that councillors will therefore have to assume a new role as *mediator* in participatory processes in the future (Borraz & Le Galès, 2005; Denters et al., 2005; Plees, 2005; Drouin, 2006). This role should help to preserve the harmony between the representative setting and its participatory complement.

Table 6.5 analyzes both sides of the coin. First, it pictures councillors' relations with citizens in the representative setting, either by informal contacts (as a councillor) on a weekly basis or formal public meetings and/or debates²⁵. Thereafter, it outlines councillors' principal support for the participative model²⁶, as well as their support for specific participatory practices that are ranked in terms of their descending impact on the policy process (i.e. decision, co-production, advice, consultation and information).

- The path-dependent hypothesis suggests more intensive contacts between councillors and citizens in the Franco system (i.e. France and Belgium), but, simultaneously, more reluctance towards active citizen involvement in it as well. The typical inward-looking governance culture of the Netherlands would result in less frequent contacts between representatives and represented. This North-Middle European style, on the other hand, would be more receptive towards citizen participation.
- According to the divergence hypothesis, Wallonia would remain illustrative of the Franco style, but Flanders would bear more characteristics of the Dutch model (e.g. due to the more radical provisions for citizen participation or the functional rationale of the *Municipal Decree*).
- Finally, the convergence hypothesis expects the differences between the different systems to have declined. For instance, Dutch efforts in the wake of the *Dualism Act* sought to bring elected representatives closer to the citizens too. And even though citizen participation is introduced (to some extent) in all countries/regions under study, it is still the representative variant that remains the dominant, hence perhaps preferred, model of local democracy in the countries across our comparative design.

²⁵ The table shows the percentage of councillors who have weekly contacts with citizens, as well as the percentage of councillors who spend at least 20% of their total time in office on public debates and meetings with citizens (in relation to other activities as a councillor such as council/committee meetings, desk work, party meetings, meetings with the local administration and field visits to local institutions).

²⁶ This principle was captured by the quote: "*citizens should participate actively and directly in making local decisions*"; the table shows the percentages of (very) high support for the quote.

Table 6.5. Councillors' relation with citizens in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France (in percentages)

	<i>General</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Cramer's V^(a)</i>
<i>Citizen contact</i>						
Individual contacts on weekly base (N=1971)	39.2	47 (+7.8)	30.6 (-8.6)	48.4 (+9.2)	30.4 (-8.8)	.13
Public debates/meetings (at least 20% of mandate) (N=1811)	11.3	10.3 (-1)	5.1 (-6.2)	12.5 (+1.2)	17.4 (+6.1)	.13
<i>Participation principle</i>						
Active/direct participation (N=1974)	50.5	41.8 (-8.7)	43.3 (-7.2)	48.4 (-2.1)	68.6 (+18.1)	.16
<i>Participation practice</i>						
Binding referenda (N=1926)	33.6	25.4 (-8.2)	31.5 (-2.1)	49.4 (+15.8)	28.9 (-4.7)	.20
Co-decision (N=1957)	40.9	26.3 (-14.6)	39.7 (-1.2)	57.2 (+16.3)	41.1 (+0.2)	.20
Advisory referenda (N=1940)	55.7	37.9 (-17.8)	45.2 (-10.5)	63.9 (+8.2)	76.6 (+20.9)	.21
Consultation (N=1973)	78.6	93.4 (+14.8)	73.4 (-5.2)	70.7 (-7.9)	76.6 (-2)	.21
Survey (N=1964)	59.8	61.8 (+2)	54 (-5.8)	68.4 (+8.6)	55.2 (-4.6)	.09

(a) All associations are significant at the .05 level

First, if we consider councillors' contact with citizens in the traditional representative setting, we notice divergent results for the councillors from Flanders and Wallonia. The results bear out the initial hypothesis. Both on the formal and informal plan, Walloon councillors seem to maintain closer relations with their grassroots than Flemish councillors. This might reflect a more outward-looking perspective that is typical of the Southern or Franco government style. Yet on the other hand, the results for France and the Netherlands do not endorse the typical path-dependent pattern for these reference countries. More Dutch than French councillors even claim to have frequent informal contacts with citizens. The latter, for their part, spend more time on formal(ized) contacts with citizens in public debates and/or meetings. This result proves that Dutch councillors no longer consider themselves as the archetypical inward-looking *regents* of their municipality. Nevertheless, a convergent pattern across our countries/regions is that despite councillors' preferences for the representational role, many local councillors spend only a limited fraction of their mandate to formal contacts with the local community. The percentage of respondents who meet with citizens on a weekly basis in

their official capacity as a councillor is not *that* large either²⁷. Consequently, councillors do not claim to rely systematically and frequently on the input from the citizens they ought to represent in order to fulfil their mandates. Perhaps, this could imply that the complexity of the office calls for a rather inward-looking perspective generally.

Second, which patterns emerge from the analysis of councillors' support for the more active inclusion of citizens in decision-making? In every country/region, at least 40% of the councillors (strongly) agree with the general *principle* that citizens should somehow participate actively and directly in the process of local decision-making. Moreover, regarding the specific participative *practices*, the overall hierarchy converges between the countries and regions as well. At the lowest rank of our participation ladder, a majority of the councillors endorse frequent surveys to monitor the local public opinion. Moving up one rank from information to consultation, even more councillors support citizen consultation procedures, where citizens are informed about and can support or criticize municipal proposals. From then on, however, councillors' enthusiasm clearly decreases with every step on the ladder, moving from citizen advice over co-production (i.e. co-decisions procedures) to the ultimate step of decision-making. In fact, a majority of the councillors still seems reluctant to actually share their ultimate decision-making power – which is already curtailed inside the local authority – with actors outside the city hall.

Nevertheless, there are clear differences in support for the principle and the practices of citizen participation between the countries and regions again. Perhaps surprisingly, Walloon councillors turn out to be stronger advocates of participatory democracy at the local level than Flemish councillors. A possible explanation is that in the aftermath of a series of political scandals, public distrust had risen much stronger in Wallonia than in Flanders (Pilet, 2008). Engaging citizens in the policy process could be seen as the appropriate way to enhance the democratic quality of local government then. Furthermore, and opposed to the theoretical claim, French councillors declare to be stronger champions of active citizen participation than Dutch councillors. The latter appear to have a clear preference for the representative model in which councillors form the link between citizens and governance. They maintain frequent contacts with citizens whilst showing strong support for public information and consultation at the lowest sports of the participation ladder. But from this point onwards, they prefer to transmit the input into policy decisions personally, as shown by their scepticism or reserve towards binding referenda or co-decision procedures.

²⁷ Obviously, this does not exclude informal contacts with citizens outside this formal capacity (e.g. in the associational life of the municipality).

6.8. COUNCILLORS' FUTURE POLITICAL AMBITIONS AND TURNOVER MOTIVES

The final part of our analysis deals with the question: 'How do local councillors envisage their political future at the end of their current mandate?' Bearing the above insights in mind, do councillors intend to leave the political stage disillusioned (- and if so, for which reasons), or are they looking forward to an encore? To answer this question Table 6.6 presents an overview of the classic political ambitions (see Schlesinger, 1966): *discrete* ambitions (i.e. quit politics), *static* ambitions (i.e. continue as a councillor) and *progressive* ambitions (i.e. continue in a higher political office at the local level and/or continue in a higher political office at another political level). Additionally, Table 6.6 lists a number of possible exit motives that explicitly relate to (the stress on) councillors' roles and positions: a lack of influence, a lack of time or the accomplishment of one's duty towards the local community²⁸.

- With regard to these analyses, the path-dependent hypothesis suggests that professionalized local systems (e.g. the Netherlands) foster long(er) and more stable careers. A lack of time could be the most plausible exit motive in such systems, given the high functional demands and the required personal investments from the councillors. In systems that are theoretically underpinned by the earmark of community representation (i.e. France and Belgium), discrete ambitions and the motive 'accomplishment of one's citizen duty' could occur more readily. Lastly, a lack of influence would be mentioned more as a possible exit motive in the strong-mayor system (i.e. France) – where the layman rule is accommodated to political leadership – than in its collective counterpart (i.e. the Netherlands and Belgium).
- According to the divergence hypothesis, Flemish councillors would lean more towards the theoretical expectations for the Dutch councillors (e.g. by the stronger emphasis on professionalization and functional demands). Walloon councillors would stay closer to the acclaimed French model (e.g. resembling the typical layman-archetype).
- Finally, the convergence hypothesis suggests that many councillors could intend to leave the political stage due to their perceived lack of influence in the local system, caused by universal trends in the local context. On the other hand, the broad trend towards professionalization might spur longer and stable careers in the local office.

²⁸ 'Future ambitions' is one variable that consists of four categories, represented in Table 6.6. Additionally, councillors who indicated that they considered leaving office, could tick several of the 'turnover reasons' listed in Table 6.6. Other possible turnover reasons that are not included in the table were 'age' and 'removal from the municipality'.

Table 6.6. Councillors' future ambitions in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France (in percentages)

	<i>General</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Cramer's V^(a)</i>
<i>Future ambitions</i> (N=1835)						<i>.07</i>
Discrete	28.7	32.3 (+3.6)	21.7 (-7)	31.9 (+3.2)	28.4 (-0.3)	
Static	42.1	43.2 (+1.1)	46 (+3.9)	36.3 (-5.8)	42.9 (+0.8)	
Progressive local	24.7	20 (-4.7)	27.7 (+3)	28.5 (+3.8)	23.2 (-1.5)	
Progressive other	4.5	4.5 (=)	4.6 (+0.1)	3.3 (-1.2)	5.5 (+1)	
<i>Turnover reason</i>						
Lack of influence (N=526)	31.6	17.3 (-14.3)	45.3 (+13.7)	50 (+18.4)	36.9 (+5.3)	<i>.29</i>
Citizen duty accomplished (N=577)	60.4	42.7 (-17.7)	56.3 (-4.1)	95.2 (+34.8)	65.5 (+5.1)	<i>.39</i>
Lack of time (N=567)	47.8	51.6 (+3.8)	50 (+2.2)	30 (-17.8)	52.3 (+4.5)	<i>.17</i>

(a) All associations are significant at the .05 level

At first sight, the differences in the future political ambitions of French, Dutch and Belgian councillors are trivial, and the overall pattern is thus convergent. Most non-executive councillors simply wish to renew their mandate – although nearly 30% express the intention to leave office after the current mandate as well (in Belgium, more Flemish councillors intend to continue their office while more Walloon councillors intend to leave). Moreover, a considerable part of the respondents also aim for higher office at the local level as an alderman or mayor, even if such career motive did not spur their political motivations initially. Perhaps, councillors' experiences in office lead them to realize that in order to stand one's ground in the local authority, a councillor should move to the higher echelons of the local system. This pattern occurs slightly more in both Belgian regions – where non-executive councillors feel they indeed have the least influence in the system. Hence, we cannot confirm the claim that limited impact results in more turnover straightforwardly. Lastly, the proportion of non-executive councillors that aim for higher office at the regional or national/federal level is minimal. Few layman-politicians thus purposively use their local mandate as a steppingstone towards a political career on the supra-local level. This is also the case in those countries where multiple office-holding is allowed and common practice (i.e. Belgium and France).

If we look at the possible exit reasons, the differences between the regions and countries are much larger. The differences between France and the Netherlands basically correspond to the expectations of our path-dependent hypothesis. In the French system, marked by the weak position of the councillors vis-à-vis the mayor and the interpretation of the office as a layman's affair, councillors mention the lack of influence and, above all, the accomplishment of one's citizen duty more often as a possible turnover motive. Additionally, a lack of time also frequently contributes to the possible exit of many councillors. In the Netherlands, where councillors have more impact in the local system and the professionalization of the office is more apparent, a lack of influence and citizen duty are mentioned less as possible exit motives. The time investment that the office requires is more decisive for Dutch councillors when quitting the council.

Finally, what about the Belgian regions? As it was the case in the previous analyses, the figures in the table point to some path-dependent *and* divergent patterns. Their subordinate position in the local authority is very likely to explain the relatively high number of Flemish and Walloon councillors who mention a lack of influence as possible turnover motive. Yet the distribution of response for the other motives could underline a different approach to the office too. Walloon councillors (intend to) quit more often because they feel they have accomplished their duty towards the local community. Like in France, such typical layman motive already triggered their candidacy (more) in the first place. For local councillors in Flanders, a lack of time is mentioned more often as a possible reason to leave the council.

6.9. CONCLUSION

Should we tell the story of contemporary sub-national politics in Belgium as a tale of regional divergence? Ever since the federalization process and the formal regionalization of local government in particular, this question has come to figure prominently on the agenda of Belgian political science. Its main hypothesis holds that Flanders would shift towards the Northern (or North-Middle European) governance style that is typical of the Dutch neighbour. Wallonia would shift more to the Southern (or Franco) style, claimed to characterize local government in France. To oppose this hypothesis, one could also imagine that Flanders and Wallonia still bear more signs of their common Belgian path-dependent legacy, however. This chapter has been devoted to this contraposition. It has applied both fundamental research hypotheses to the role and position of non-executive local councillors in the twenty-first century – a subject that has been discussed with much scepticism in the academic literature lately. In order to verify the basic hypotheses and interpret the differences between both regions more profoundly, we have compared councillors from Flanders and Wallonia regarding their acclaimed reference points, i.e.

councillors from the Netherlands and France. This comparative approach also introduced a third fundamental research hypothesis. It states that the local systems in contemporary European local governance have rather converged, moving beyond traditional styles and typologies.

We have tested the three basic research hypotheses in an actor-centred and empirical way. On the basis of standardized cross-sectional survey data from a uniform urban setting, we systematically compared the notion of Flemish, Walloon, Dutch and French non-executive local councillors on their role and position in the local system. The analysis incorporated different aspects of the life as a councillor: the recruitment process to the council, the general role orientation in office, the self-placement in the local hierarchy, the relation with citizens and citizen participation and, lastly, the future political ambitions and turnover reasons. We can summarize our conclusions in three broad categories.

On the most general level, the patterns often converge across the countries and regions under study. First and foremost, councillors acknowledge that they are not protagonists on the local scene. They systematically place political leaders at the helm of their local government and rank themselves as the least influential actors. Besides, the fundamental discrepancy between the importance that councillors pay to their role and the way in which they (are able to) implement it, adds to the image of the councillor as a subordinate actor in the political system. Non-executive councillors are not always very enthusiastic to open up the policy-making process for non-elected citizens as real decision-makers either. Furthermore, the complex and challenging interpretation of the modern office leaves its marks on the pathway to and in the council as well. Both pre-council and in-council experience show strong signs of professionalization. As such, the intake of local citizens with a selective personal background (further) reduces the diversity of the councils. And afterwards, councillors do not particularly appear to communicate on a very frequent basis with their grassroots in their formal capacity either.

On a more positive note, we have noticed that clear signs of lay politics persist across the systems as well. For most councillors, the task as representative of the locality remains the cornerstone of their political mandate. And to fulfil this task most councillors are in favour of using citizen consultation schemes. Councillors do not principally distinguish between the representative task and the output side of their mandate as governor of local affairs either. Furthermore, in the preceding recruitment process, the inclusion in the associational life remains a prerequisite for council work while few councillors enter the council with a clear professional career plan in mind already. Finally at the curtain call, it does not seem as though the possible frustration about the lack of impact leads councillors to renounce their faith in the office completely. A considerable portion of the councillor population seeks re-election, or even promotion to a higher local office.

Meanwhile, the lack of influence is not mentioned as the most important turnover motive either. Accordingly, the following quote on French councillors might aptly convey the current role and position of local councillors in the political system: “*Admittedly as second-class actors but also as privileged observers, they learn how democracy works from within. As such, they play an irreplaceable role in promoting and, hopefully, renovating the latter, and so they will keep doing*” (Drouin, 2006: 207, translated quote from French). This is why council work could remain the most exciting and versatile hobby in the end, even if not every councillor would agree (Tops & Zouridis, 2002).

Underneath this general converging surface, however, we also find clear patterns of path-dependency in each particular country setting. They stem as much from informal and cultural customs as from formal local rules. The strongest difference is found between the roles of political parties. In the Netherlands and Belgium, parties are clearly more important than in France. The parties cross-cut the entire pre-council and in-council experience in both countries. This influence ranges from motivating, selecting and supporting candidates to the development of political attitudes and behaviour in office whilst empowering councillors in their party group – even though Belgian parties are clearly less successful on this final point²⁹.

Further, results for France and the Netherlands largely correspond to the theoretical expectations. The French Southern culture of *communitarianism* is reflected in the preference of its councillors for the representative role and a recruitment path that has more in common with the neutral and open layman-type. In fact, French councils count more women and members from foreign descent. Their councillors were more often inspired by citizen duty and supported by the associational life. When they intend to leave office, this is often because councillors feel they have fulfilled their citizen duty. Yet from a comparative perspective, the lack of influence is a regular exit motive too. Indeed, French councillors acknowledge that their political system is a strong-mayor type. This system seems largely dominated by a powerful mayor, and a CEO who works in close harmony with the *municipal monarch*. Lastly, and perhaps surprisingly, French councillors tend to endorse citizen participation more than on average.

²⁹ We could probably consider this to be one of the effects of the dualistic political system in the Netherlands. In Appendix F, we further specify the differences in the performances of the party groups (Table 6.6 and Table 6.7). The analyses clearly indicate that Dutch party groups have more emancipatory potential. They are nearly always led by a co-operative leader. And even though the party groups are influenced by the local party, they often succeed in exerting influence *on* this party too. Not surprisingly, most Dutch councillors feel that they should follow their own opinions when they have to cast their votes in the council (and their opinions deviate from the official party line). This is less the case in Belgium. Fewer party groups are led by a co-operative leader. Furthermore in Flanders, councillors are more inclined to vote according to the party line in the event of conflicting views. In Wallonia, the party group seems less independent from (and influential vis-à-vis) the local party organization.

Many figures on the Dutch councillors are in line with the path-dependent theory as well. Accordingly, the Dutch system often contrasts with the French system. Dutch councillors seem more professionalized in order to assume their functional role in local government. They have the most selective social profile and a (slight) preference for the output side of their mandate – even though they keep close contacts with citizens to gather the necessary policy input also. A lack of time is their most common exit motive. Meanwhile, both formal-structural (e.g. the *Dualism Act*) and informal-cultural rules (e.g. the organization of the party groups) are likely explanations behind the fact that Dutch councillors place themselves higher in the local hierarchy. They characterize the Dutch system as a collective type in which the impact of collective actors (i.e. the executive board, the heads of department, the party groups) outweighs the impact of single figures such as the mayor, the CEO or the councillors. Lastly, citizen duty and the lack of influence are mentioned less as possible exit motives in the Netherlands.

In comparison with these two reference countries, the results for the local councillors in Flanders and Wallonia bear out many similarities. The key role of political parties as focal point was mentioned before. Further, councillors on both sides of the language border claim to fulfil their role analogously. Indeed, the Southern culture results in the dominance of the representative input role whilst the discrepancy between role attitude and role behaviour is substantial amongst both groups. It is not surprising that councillors subsequently depict their place in the local constellation as inferior to the professionals and, above all, the political leaders. This pattern is even stronger than in France. There is a fair chance that such subordination is partly caused by the dominant position of the executives in the political parties as well. But above all, it shows that the functioning of a local system in practice might differ substantially and systematically from its theoretical conception. This is perhaps why the lack of influence is mentioned more often by the Belgian councillors as a potential exit motive at the end of their mandate.

Nevertheless on the third and most detailed level, our conclusions bring some nuances and divergences between Flanders and Wallonia to the surface. Basically, these seem to support the claim that the Flemish region adopts a more functional and professional approach to local government indeed, whilst Wallonia has more in common with the French system. Flemish councillors place more emphasis on their administrative output roles. They are also under the impression that the professional administrative branch of local government has more influence than in Wallonia and mention a lack of time more often as a possible exit motive. Flemish councillors even feel more powerless than their colleagues across the language border. In Wallonia, more signs of the typical *communitarianism* persist. Citizen duty matters more to enter and leave the council for instance. Walloon councillors keep closer informal and formal contacts with the citizens

of their locality as well. And lastly, they seem stronger advocates of the principal and practical involvement of citizens in local decision-making.

In summary, our analysis has thus demonstrated that in terms of councillors' role and position, there is some degree of internal differentiation in the political system of the Belgian state. Yet simultaneously, the international comparative approach has allowed us to present these results in a wider perspective. Compared to the Netherlands and France, the Belgian regions still have many characteristics in common. Moreover, many facets of councillors' roles and positions are even convergent across traditional state boundaries and typical government traditions nowadays. Follow-up research could now help to further grasp and frame the range of these patterns over the long haul. Besides, complementary research could also widen our perspective by (a) including councillors from municipalities below the 10.000-threshold, (b) testing our insights in different settings via qualitative in-depth analyses and (c) scrutinizing new actors or domains of the political system.

CHAPTER 7

GENERAL CONCLUSION

7.1. RESEARCH GOAL, STRATEGY AND OUTLINE

In his book on elected representatives in French municipalities, Drouin (2006: 5) refers to the local councillors as the “*Fantassins de la République*”, the infantrymen or foot soldiers of the republic. The place of these councillors in the French political system is quite paradoxical. Usually well-known to the electorate, they are largely neglected as political actors. When journalists, scientists or politicians mention the extraordinary figure of the 500.000 French local councillors, it is usually to immediately turn their attention to the top 7% among them, namely the mayors. According to the author, the army of local councillors is therefore comprised of infantrymen that are of little interest to their general command.

To a large extent, this metaphor also seems valid in the context of Belgian local democracy. Local councillors form the largest group of elected politicians in the Belgian political system by far. Given the small scale of municipal politics, councillors are typically firmly rooted in, and familiar with, their locality. Nevertheless, few people are truly aware of the role and position of these *citizen-politicians* in the local authority – as they are often outshined by the mayor and the aldermen too. Meanwhile, political science has also overlooked these infantrymen of the Belgian state for some time.

During the past decade, however, things have cautiously started to change around. Central government, in the capacity of local governments’ general command, has initiated a wave of reforms that has sought to empower local councils and local councillors as the bedrock and key actors of the local system. This formal policy line was, and still is, accompanied by an emerging debate on the role and position of local councillors in academic circles. The starting point of this debate is the theoretical notion of councillors as the *foundation* of local democracy. In the representative local system, councillors personify the democratic rule of the people, bearing the responsibility to convey citizens’ input in optimal policy output in a transparent and accountable manner. In doing so, councillors form the dominant institution of the local authority. Yet many

scholars feel that stress might have rendered local councillors mere *fragments* of current local democracy. Within the Belgian setting, this stress stems from causes that include some ingrained obstacles of the political system (e.g. the need to reconcile the outward-looking part of the councillor office with its inward-oriented complement), the informal rules of the game (e.g. party discipline and the supremacy of the executive branch) and recent evolutions in the environment of the political system (e.g. demand overload, output failures, decreasing public support, adaptation of the local regime through professionalization and the evolution towards local governance, etc.).

Prompted by the problem of the friction between these perspectives, the goal of our study has been to shed an empirical light on the role and position of local councillors in the political system in Belgium. The fundamental research question thereby reads: ‘*Should we consider Belgian local councillors as the foundation of local democracy, or rather as a fragment of it?*’ In the introductory chapter (*Chapter 1*) and the methodological chapter (*Chapter 2*), we have indicated that it is impossible to answer such a question with a simple *yes* or *no*. This is why our fundamental research question has been operationalized in several thematic analyses that have entailed different applied research questions. These thematic analyses are:

- councillors’ political recruitment process and political career (*Chapter 3*),
- councillors’ classic role orientation (*Chapter 4*),
- councillors’ interpretation of their mandate as elected representative of the locality (*Chapter 5*) and
- councillors’ role and position placed in a broader, international comparative frame (*Chapter 6*).

Every theme contributed some particular pieces to the general puzzle, helping to arrive at a balanced and multifaceted answer to our fundamental research question.

To achieve this goal, we have chosen to conduct our research on a quantitative, cross-sectional and actor-centred basis via descriptive and explanatory analysis. This implies that we have focussed directly on the current population of Belgian local councillors as prime subjects of interest. In 2008, we requested a selection of councillors, including aldermen and mayors who theoretically remain councillors too, to answer a standard mail questionnaire. This selection represents the Belgian municipal landscape in terms of region, size and socio-economic profile. Councillors could fill in and return the questionnaire anonymously. Despite a rather disappointing response rate and a slight over-representation of Flemish councillors and councillors from larger municipalities in our final data set, we have managed to assemble valid empirical data from 856 cases. This figure equals 1/16 of the total councillor population in the country while covering approximately 30% of all Belgian municipalities.

The questions in the survey deal with a wide range of topics. Per research theme, such broad pallet has enabled us to take many facets of the political system into account, such as councillors' personal opinions, personal characteristics, contact patterns, elements of the political culture, structural features, the role of political parties and the surrounding environment of Belgian local government. In doing so, we have been able to examine councillors' role and position from a *new institutional* perspective. This perspective reckons with both formal and informal rules of the political regime, as well as with its wider opportunity structure.

This conclusive chapter forms the seventh and final phase of our research cycle. It generalizes the results of the study in three steps. First, the chapter summarizes the thematic conclusions, discerns transversal patterns and interprets them in light of our research problem and fundamental research question. Then, it links these conclusions to the normative soil of the debate on local councillors that underpins the research. Which implications do our empirical insights yield in response to the initial research problem and the discussion on councillors' role and position in the Belgian local system more generally? Which future perspectives might seem plausible and/or viable with regard to councillors' role and position to obtain a local system that functions both democratically, transparently and efficiently? Finally, we discuss the implications of our study for the scientific state of the art. What are the main merits of our study, but above all: How could or should further empirical research proceed from here? Which new research cycles could originate from ours?

7.2. THEMATIC AND TRANSVERSAL CONCLUSIONS

In the first step of our conclusion, we will tackle the four operational themes of the study. Per theme, we outline the relation to our fundamental research problem, and we assemble and interpret the different insights from the applied research questions. Subsequently, we will discern some transversal patterns that cut across these analyses and blend them together in a general response to our fundamental research question.

7.2.1. Professionalization in political recruitment and career: necessary asymmetry or undemocratic imbalance?

The first theme has tackled councillors' recruitment path to the council and their career development once they had been elected. Both components were analyzed in terms of their degree of professionalization. Professionalization is often defended as a practical tool for the political system to cope with its increasing demands and overcome output

failures in a complex environment. The concept refers to the growing importance of (a) personal skills (i.e. the *personal or intellectual* component) and party ties and incentives (i.e. the *political* component) in the recruitment process; as well as (b) a political career marked by comprehensive time dedication and multiple office-holding (i.e. the *focus*), extensive experience and strong ambitions (i.e. the *perspective*). The growing number of professionalized councillors is then claimed to be no more than a necessary asymmetry *in* the council, but also between the council and its community, needed to efficiently run the political system of the municipality.

Opponents of this view, however, argue that professionalization creates an undemocratic balance. The symbolic and normative side of this argument states that in our representative democracies, the political regime is based on equality and openness, not on selectivity and isolation. Professionalized representatives would enhance the gap between citizens and politics, challenge the core principles of the system (e.g. amateurism, equality) and, therefore, accelerate its loss of public support. Additionally, the functional side of the argument holds that the typical lay politicians, who are (more) grounded in their locality, have far better chances of picking up signals from the community on the input side of the system, and convert these signals into corresponding policies on the output side.

The aim of our analysis has not been to settle this debate from a normative perspective, but to apply it to the current degree of professionalization in the recruitment (*ARQ1*) and career (*ARQ2*) of the councillors in the Belgian local system. Additionally, we have verified whether both aspects of professionalization relate in a path-dependent way (*ARQ3*). Regarding professionalization in the recruitment process, the result was ambiguous. Typical recruitment bias (e.g. gender, age, roots) have remained in place – even though this trend goes slightly downwards over an extended period of time. Additionally, personal/intellectual and political professionalization are apparent. This could confirm the claim that the political system has indeed adapted itself to cope with the increasing demands in a complex environment. Taken together, the Belgian councillor population thus definitely do not form a representative cross-section of the locality. On the other hand, typical layman characteristics (e.g. the inclusion in the local community, initial motivations) are still very important in the process. At least initially, councillors have enough channels and incentives to pick up and voice signals from society in the political system. And while the impact of the political party rather adds to the classic stereotypes in recruitment, personal/intellectual professionalization could also emancipate less privileged groups to move to the political office.

Subsequently, what about councillors' career in office? The large majority of Belgian councillors still fulfil their mandate as typical laymen in terms of career focus and duration, even though future ambitions tend towards the professional type. Accordingly,

the council does not seem to create a sphere strictly separate and exclusive from society. Yet simultaneously, the principle of equality in the council might already have become obsolete. Indeed, a group of councillors hold office in a rather professional way both in terms of career focus and perspective. These professionalized office-holders are not always the products of a professionalized route to the council, however. The part of the career that is exclusively local (i.e. the time dedication and incumbency), is mainly determined by the general opportunity structure of the Belgian local system and councillors' personal characteristics. The part of the career that exceeds the local system (i.e. multiple office-holding and future ambitions), on the other hand, is stimulated by a professional route to the council beforehand. Meanwhile, above all councillors who move (or had moved) to the executive functions in the council develop a professional career in office. Because this group tends to benefit more from classic recruitment bias and professionalization in recruitment as well, we could understand this result as an indication of a strong imbalance in the Belgian local system.

7.2.2. Role orientation: foundation or fragment of local democracy?

The second thematic chapter has addressed the classic role orientation of the Belgian councillors. The classic role-set consists of representation on the input side of the system and policy and control on the output side. From inside the core of the local system, councillors' role fulfilment should theoretically and formally contribute to its democratic and efficient performance. Consequently, every councillor holds the principal responsibility to convert community needs and demands into congruent policy outputs. We have analyzed councillors' self-reported role attitude (*ARQ4*) and role behaviour (*ARQ5*), as well as the discrepancy between both (*ARQ6*). Subsequently, we have ascertained the determinants of this role orientation (*ARQ7*).

First, the analysis has shown that Belgian local councillors generally recognize the importance of their triple role-set. In line with the typical image of the councillor as an elected *layman-politician*, Belgian councillors conceive their mandate above all as a means to represent the demands from the locality in the political arena. Additionally, the articulation of the strategic goals of the municipal policy and the control on its implementation afterwards are deemed quite important as well. Councillors are thus well aware of their important role as engine of the political system that conveys public input into congruent policy output. As such, there is at least a broadly supported basis in place whereupon a democratic and vigorous local system might lean. The variation in councillors' role attitude is mainly determined by councillors' experience (i.e. experienced councillors tending to endorse their role-set slightly more), region (i.e. Flemish councillors adopting a more output oriented perspective) and the informal rules

of the game. While councillors from the political majority particularly support their role as policy-makers, councillors from the opposition mainly focus on policy control. Such balance might work as a healthy scheme of checks and balances in the local system. Further, representation seems the preferred interpretation of the councillor office by the typical laymen who have no experience in the executive board. Considered the other way around, however, this result might also hint at a possible weakening of the bond between citizens and their representatives once the latter have moved to an executive office in the system.

Second, when councillors were asked to evaluate their actual contribution to the same role-set, less positive results emerged. Representation appears to be the main focus of councillors' activities in practice too. It is probably the domain in which councillors can make the most tangible and/or rewarding impact from a personal point of view, for instance by very specific casework, the inclusion in the local community, debates in the council or simply the *politics of presence*¹. Nonetheless, the group of councillors who feel that they make a real meaningful contribution to voicing citizens' demands in the political system decreased substantially compared to the initial role attitude. Furthermore, this pattern was even more pronounced in the analysis of councillors' complementary tasks as architects and scrutinizers of the local system. Only half of the Belgian local councillor population claims to truly succeed in controlling local policies. Even less manage to define its broad contours beforehand. Clearly, this could evoke questions about the democratic control on local policies in some municipalities, and the public support that should legitimize strategic policy choices in the first place.

Moreover, it points out that many local councillors are unable, rather than unwilling, to assume their role in the political system. Such role discrepancy is probably more problematic than the gap between the formal rules of the game and the way in which they are implemented in practice. In fact, it could bring about many disillusionments and/or frustrations amongst the group of *toothless* councillors. It is mainly the decision-making *culture* of the Belgian system, i.e. the informal rules of the game, that accounts for these deficits. Councillors from the majority feel that they contribute much more to policy-making, but also representation, than councillors from the opposition. Additionally, the latter do not believe that they are the prime scrutinizers either. Furthermore, the councillors with executive experience contribute much more to every role of the classic role-set. Such result corroborates the description of the Belgian local system as an example of *inversed monism* in practice – even though professionalization in terms of education and experience, as well as an open mind to active citizen participation in the policy process, might empower councillors in office too.

¹ Tops and Zouridis (2002) call this the *anticipating power* of the councillors.

7.2.3. *Political representation: people's delegate or system entrepreneur?*

Whereas the previous theme has addressed councillors' tasks in the political system, the third theme has focused more broadly on the way in which they implement these tasks. In political science, how councillors interpret and fulfil their mandate as representative of the citizens is usually captured in the concept *representative style*. Some authors are quite pessimistic about the nature of contemporary political representation generally. They claim that elected representatives act more and more independently from the (wishes of the) citizens. Such representatives run the system as personal and political professionals or entrepreneurs who lose touch with the daily lives of the people they ought to represent. An elitist style could stem from the increasing functional demands of the system, as well as the resulting professionalization of the councillor office. According to the sceptics, then, the perceived gap between citizens and politics is symptomatic for the elitist style of political representation in the modern system. Nevertheless, other authors are far more optimistic about the nature of contemporary political representation at the local level. Partly in response to the waning public support for the system, but also precisely due to the qualities of local politics as such (e.g. the closer distance between represented and representatives), these authors feel that political representation might come closer to the popular ideal of delegation – according to which councillors act mainly on the initiative of the locality. Simultaneously, the new regime of local governance adds to the theoretical complexity between both positions. On one hand, the strategic and long-term perspective of decision-making in governance might call for a(n) (further) entrepreneurial/elitist style. On the other hand, the close interactions in this regime could also foster more popular ways of political representation.

We have analyzed political representation on the basis of a theoretical model that combines the direction of the representative relation (i.e. from above, neutral or from below) with the control on this relation (i.e. *ex ante*, neutral or *ex post*). Consequently, the model discerns four basic modes or styles of representation (i.e. the idealistic/popular variant *delegation*; *authorization*; *responsiveness* and the entrepreneurial/elitist variant *accountability*), as well as one neutral, all-round style and four intermediate styles. Each respondent was asked to evaluate his/her representative attitude (ARQ8) and behaviour (ARQ9). In addition to the descriptive analysis of these components and the relation between both (ARQ10), explanatory analyses searched for possible determinants of councillors' representative attitude and behaviour (ARQ11).

On the attitudinal level, we have found that the majority of the councillors favours the all-round style of political representation. The all-round style holds the middle between delegation, authorization, responsiveness and accountability. Moreover, all aspects of the representative style were deemed quite important. This suggests that Belgian local councillors at least wish to make the most of their task as elected representative. The

idealistic/popular style of delegation turns out to be the preferred style amongst the other councillors. Such a finding supports the positive hypothesis on the current state of political representation. On the local level in Belgium, many councillors feel that it is their job to voice citizen's requests and demands in the political system and publicize the debate on local issues before they are decided upon. These aspects of their office are deemed more important than implementing the party program and explaining decisions afterwards. Councillors' representative attitudes are mainly determined by their personal characteristics (e.g. highly educated councillors preferring delegation; professional motivations leading to more elitist conceptions of the office; lay motivations and the desire to continue in office predicting more popular conceptions), their contact pattern in the governance arena (e.g. inward-looking contacts leading to an entrepreneurial vision on representation, outward-looking contacts corresponding to the more popular variant) and the wider institutional context of the system (e.g. Flemish councillors preferring authorization as the dominant mode of representation).

Councillors' self-reported representative behaviour was even more balanced between authorization, delegation, accountability and responsiveness. Yet this does also imply that councillors act more *entrepreneurial* than they would principally prefer. More specifically, the councillors contribute more to implementing the party program and, above all, explaining decisions afterwards in relation to the transmission of public views and the publication of debate on policy issues beforehand. However, as the relation between the modes is still quite balanced, such a finding does not straightforwardly confirm the claim that political representation is outright elitist or entrepreneurial nowadays. Besides, it is surprising that councillors' (selective) political profile (e.g. function or position in the council, experience in other offices or formal networks) is not a major determinant of the way they claim to fulfil their mandate. Rather, the latter stems from individual personal characteristics and contact patterns. Councillors' representative style thus seems more contingent upon personal and often subjective mechanisms than structural features of the local system as such. Highly educated councillors, councillors inspired by citizen duty and councillors who are supportive of active citizen participation take a more popular approach to their mandate. So do councillors who have frequent contacts with civil society. Councillors who entered the council to serve their party more often follow the entrepreneurial style of accountability. Frequent contacts with citizens tend to correspond with responsiveness as the dominant mode in practice, while frequent contacts with the party group encourage representation from above.

7.2.4. *Comparative frame: regional divergence, convergence or path-dependency?*

The fourth and final thematic analysis has deepened and widened the research scope of the study hitherto. On one hand, it has focused solely on the non-executive councillors from an urban context. This choice was a consequence of the functional limitations of our international dataset. On the other hand, the analysis has broadened the research scope in a dual way. Many of the above analyses were synthesized, while some additional elements (i.e. councillors' self-placement in the local hierarchy, councillors' relation with citizens and possible turnover motives) were introduced as well. Moreover, the Belgian results were compared to the results from councillors in the Netherlands and France. The value of such international comparison for our study is threefold. First, it allows us to generalize and/or contextualize the specific findings from the Belgian context. Second, it provides an operational frame to verify (a particular application of) the often-stated hypothesis that the local systems in the Belgian regions Flanders and Wallonia diverge towards the model of the Netherlands and France respectively. Third and lastly, the insights from these contexts might offer us some clues to predict possible future perspectives concerning the role and position of the local councillors in Belgium (see further in *Section 7.3*).

The analysis has systematically compared a wide array of indicators of councillors' roles and positions. It commenced with the recruitment process that steers councillors to office. Then, it addressed their role and acclaimed position inside the local system. The fourth part looked across the border of the political system by scrutinizing councillors' relations with citizens and citizen participation. Finally, the analysis dealt with councillors' ambitions and turnover motives at the end of their mandate. This cycle was interpreted on the basis of three broad research hypotheses: the role and position of councillors from Flanders and Wallonia have diverged towards the respective systems of the Netherlands and France (*ARQ12*); the role and position of the councillors still reflect the path-dependent legacy of the three countries (*ARQ13*); and the role and position of the councillors in France, the Netherlands and the two Belgian regions have generally converged (*ARQ14*).

The analysis has shown that some of the Belgian trends are also present in the neighbouring countries. For instance, councillors' recruitment process is marked by a strong selectivity in personal terms (e.g. intellectual professionalization). Typical layman assets (e.g. the inclusion in the associational life of the community, the absence of a clear political career plan initially) occur in the four local systems too. Moreover, representation is a popular role for almost every councillor in every system. Two other convergent patterns point in the direction of councillors' subordinate position in the local authority, however: many councillors face a strong role discrepancy, and political leaders generally dominate non-executive councillors in the political system. A majority of the

councillors are not truly enthusiastic about welcoming citizens as additional *decisive* policy-makers in the local system either – albeit most are prone to welcome some form of consultation. Contacts with citizens (as a councillor in function) take place regularly, but not on a daily or weekly basis. Finally, at the end of their current mandate most councillors wish to simply renew it. Others intend to leave office or aspire to become an alderman or mayor. Few councillors seek to use their current office as a steppingstone to a political career at the supra-local level.

In addition to these convergent patterns, councillors from Belgium, France and the Netherlands also mirror their typical path-dependent legacy. French councillors rather correspond to the ideal-type of the layman: their recruitment process is more open and less professional (e.g. gender, foreign roots, the sense of citizen duty, support local associations) and councillors contribute more to the input role. They are also stronger advocates of citizen participation, and are bound less by their political party. When these councillors intend to leave office, this is more often because they feel that they have accomplished their citizen duty, or because they lack influence in the system. In fact, most French councillors acknowledge their system as a strong-mayor type. The Dutch councillors have more in common with the professional type. Political parties determine their recruitment process, which is more selective too. Councillors place more emphasis on the functional output roles and label the Dutch system as a collective type. Particularly in the party group, Dutch councillors feel that they have more impact in the local system. A lack of time is their most common exit motive.

Belgian councillors, for their part, have some typical characteristics in common with their French colleagues (e.g. the preference for the input side of the mandate, the lack of influence as a frequent exit motive), and others with the councillors from the Netherlands (e.g. the influence of political parties in recruitment and the council). Nevertheless, the results also underscore some divergence between councillors from Flanders and Wallonia. The direction of this divergence (partly) confirms that Flanders takes a more functional approach to the councillor office while Wallonia stays closer to the Southern culture of *communitarianism*. For instance, the output side of the mandate is considered to be more important in Flanders, just as the impact of the professional administrative branch in the local authority. The latter could partly explain the smaller impact of single councillors and party groups in the Flemish councils (in addition, for instance, to the possible effect of the constructive no-confidence vote in Wallonia). In Wallonia, we have found more signs of the typical *primacy of politics* (e.g. the stronger influence of councillors to the detriment of the municipal administration) and the classic layman patterns (e.g. the importance of citizen duty as initial and turnover motive). Walloon councillors also have more frequent contacts with citizens, and are the strongest advocates of active and direct citizen participation.

7.2.5. *Summary and transversal patterns*

Following from these results, should we conclude that Belgian local councillors form the foundation or a fragment of local democracy? As it is often the case with such broad and metaphorical research questions, the answer lies somewhere in between. Let us, therefore, assemble the different pieces of our puzzle. The first piece is the process by which citizens select their peers to make up the representative assembly, henceforth ruling the municipality on their behalf. The democratic ideal of the political system posits equality, openness and, consequently, representativeness as the core values on this subject. A broad and diverse council composition is seen as the best guarantee to voice all relevant input from society (i.e. the functional argument). It also enhances public support based on general feelings of equity and fairness (i.e. the symbolic argument). In the Belgian system, however, the local councils are not a cross-section of their locality at large. Particular segments of society are still strongly overrepresented, albeit some ancient bias seems to be slowly on the decline. At the same time, the increasing degree of professionalization, in the form of councillors' personal calibre and party ties, introduces a new form of selectivity into the process. These trends could validate that the local system has gradually, and perhaps subconsciously, adapted itself in order to augment public support on the one hand while, above all, seeking to handle its increasing and complex demands on the other.

Meanwhile, the broader implications of such trends have yet to come to the surface. Even if it challenges the very principles of the system and possibly narrows down or colours the input of needs and demands, (a certain degree of) selectivity could be required to prevent the system from producing output failures altogether. Being a local councillor might be a layman's ideal, it undeniably requires craftsmanship nowadays (Tops and Zouridis, 2002). Our analysis shows that the impact of *professionalization* is at least ambivalent. It does not run counter to the almost imperative condition for local councillors to be firmly embedded in the local community, for instance. Since most councillors have lived a considerable part of their lives in the municipality and are members of its organized community, they are still well-placed to pick up and voice inputs from society. And at least initially, councillors do not correspond to the image of the professional office-seeker *who is in it for the money or power* either. Besides, professionalization, as the emerging form of selectivity, seems to relate to the ancient recruitment bias in a double way. The intellectual component through education or profession could help traditionally underprivileged groups to find their way to the council. The political component, i.e. the impact of political parties as selection agents or gatekeepers, however, rather adds to the other stereotypes. This gives parties a reactive

role in the recruitment process, placing more focus on those persons from the already established pool of *privileged* candidates (see Rallings et al., 2010)².

What should we think of such party roles in recruitment – arguably one of the most determining features of the recruitment process in Belgium? The recruitment to political office is one of the classic functions of the political party. We can expect that this function will become both more necessary *and* challenging in the future. While we have seen that most Belgian councillors were asked to stand for office, and thus were actively recruited, it is also often heard in the corridors of the parties that this quest becomes more arduous every time. Looking for candidates from the different layers and subgroups of society then obviously further adds to the complex task of finding and convincing motivated candidates. Nevertheless, compared to the other selectorates (e.g. individual influential persons, associations, local lists), parties still have the advantage of being able to rely on ample expertise, networks and financial means to this end. As Rallings and his colleagues (2010) note, we should therefore probably look at the parties as possible solutions to the problem of unrepresentative councils, rather than as a part of the problem in itself. Such a claim, however, suggests that Belgian parties still have plenty of room for improvement. They should become even more aware of their crucial task in the recruitment process and, above all, take a more proactive approach in trying to enhance the representativeness of their lists and, ultimately, the councils. Yet there is more to this discussion. Indeed, by recruiting and supporting candidates in their race to office, parties (might) also lay the foundation for strict party discipline in office later on. This brings us to the other pieces of our puzzle: councillors' role and position in the system once they have been elected.

According to another academic line of thought, the lack of socio-demographic representativeness in the council does not necessarily have to pose that much of a problem, as long as it gives way to a democratic interpretation of the mandate *in office*. From this perspective, *who* governs is less important than *how* this is done. The theoretical/normative starting point on this matter is usually that the councillor office should remain a layman's affair. It is occupied by citizen-politicians who are firmly rooted in the locality. This asset allows them to collect and voice the relevant local demands (i.e. real-life problems) and make the proper policy choices (i.e. avoid output failures). Representation on the input side of the office is therefore paired with the definition of strategic policy goals and scrutiny on the output side. Theoretically, every councillor also holds the responsibility of contributing to this role-set. The principle is engrafted in the one man-one vote principle. Meanwhile, an open and transparent way of

² According to Rallings et al. (2010), an opposite theoretical explanation for the lack of representativeness in party recruitment could be that parties are proactively trying to recruit different types of candidates, but fail to do so in the end.

implementing these roles (i.e. the throughput side) should provide maximum guarantees for public support. Lastly, the principle of the electoral chain of command in the representative system implies a functional differentiation in this system between council, executive board and administration. Councillors' unique position as democratically elected actors should thereby place them at the helm of the local authority structure.

The situation in the Belgian setting seems twofold again. In terms of a political career, the image of the layman still stands firm for most councillors. Few local councillors are politicians in the true professional sense of the word. The continuous link with the locality through one's profession and the associational life assures that many channels and incentives are at least available to transfer inputs to the system. Councillors' role attitude complies with the theoretical postulates as well. A large majority of the councillor population thinks it is important to implement the three basic tasks as a councillor. This means that councillors do not seem to face a fundamental democratic dilemma between representation, i.e. being a familiar councillor, and good governance in principal terms. Moreover, the variance in role attitudes between the councillors is largely in accordance with prevailing ideas of checks and balances between majority and opposition, between executives and non-executives. The other dilemma dances are not echoed in councillors' perceptions of the way in which they ought to fulfil their mandate either. Indeed, most councillors prefer a representative style that unites delegation, authorization, responsiveness and accountability as fundamental building blocks of a transparent and democratic system. In addition to such an all-round style, they clearly wish to focus on the interests of their municipality as a whole. The latter does not mean that some councillors have no additional interests of particular groups in mind, however. And not every councillor aims at being an all-round representative. Yet when councillors have a preference for one representative style in particular, they choose the idealistic variant of delegation, which considers themselves as instructed advocates from the constituency. So far, so good, it seems.

Nevertheless, other pieces of the puzzle make up a less optimistic picture. One indication is that councillors claim to fulfil their role in more entrepreneurial, top-down and political ways than they would prefer to. This shift implies that councillors are bound more by their party programs in relation to the requests and issues from the locality whilst explaining policies gains importance compared to publicizing debate beforehand. Yet in spite of this trend, councillors' representative styles are still balanced overall. The results of councillors' self-reported implementation of their classic role-set are more problematic. Here councillors' dilemma dance is clearly settled in favour of their role as popular representatives. But even in this most elementary task, many councillors are under the impression that they fail to exert true impact on the political system. And despite the preference for representation, councillors still allocate most of their time to

council (and party) business. Formal and informal contacts with citizens in the official capacity as a councillor do not take place on a daily basis either. Taken together, this pattern of political representation, role behaviour and concrete action suggests that the political system probably relies quite often on *withinputs* that are put forward by the representatives, underpinned by their personal experience and the party as an influential gatekeeper.

Councillors' role fulfilment is most worrisome in terms of the strategic definition of the general policy goals and the control on their implementation afterwards. We might imagine that councillors are still better caseworkers than strategic thinkers indeed. Yet considering the fact that more than half of the councillor population fails to have a significant impact on the output side of the political system, we might conclude that it is seemingly hard for many councillors to meet the formal, but also their personal, expectations concerning local office. In the words of Stewart (1991: 30 and 26), councillors thus are hardly "*responsible for anything that happens in the authority*" and many have no "*rich and reinvigorating contribution*" to make at all.

The main causes of this anomaly are two informal rules of the game that seem widespread and ingrained in the Belgian system: the impact of political parties and the dominance of the executive branch. Results of the former are seen in the strong divide between councillors from the majority and councillors from the opposition – who often lack influence to make meaningful contributions to the political process. Party discipline is also felt when votes are cast, while a professionalized political recruitment process and frequent contacts in the party sphere lead towards a professional career and a more entrepreneurial view on the mandate as well. Regarding the second informal rule, our study shows that councillors who have gained experience in an executive function in local government dominate the system by and large. They take the initiative in every basic role of the political process. If we consider the fact that these councillors establish many signs of a professional career, have a selective personal profile and a strong position in the party (group) as well, the informal rules turn out to be strong signals of the professionalization and selectivity of the Belgian local system. They indicate that the council's internal dilemma dances are basically settled in favour of an authoritative executive structure and an opposition that is left to oppose the majority in place, rather than actively contributing to the policy-making process. And even on this subject, opposition councillors often fail to exert real control on local policies. It is telling, for instance, that executives and councillors from the majority are more convinced of the effectiveness of the typical instruments that councillors have been attributed to fulfil their duty (e.g. voting, interpellations, inquiry and information). Not surprisingly, Belgian non-executive councillors place themselves on the lowest rank of the classic local power hierarchy. They feel subordinate to the mayor, the executive board as well as the

influential administration. Accordingly, the Belgian political system indeed bears many marks of *inversed monism*.

Our analyses also demonstrate that this picture does not apply to every councillor in equal measure though. Education, for instance, might not only compensate for traditional recruitment bias, it turns out to be a frequent determinant of the role and position of councillors in office too. Albeit having less experience in the office generally, highly educated councillors feel they have more impact in scrutinizing local affairs. They are more ambitious at the same time and hold more popular views on their mandate as representative of the people. Further, the positive impact that experience has on councillors' role orientation suggests that it probably takes time to master council business. Both elements imply that *some* form of professionalization could be required to stand one's ground in the political system as a councillor. The effects of having a selective professional background prior to the office are less outspoken.

On the other hand, councillors who keep an open mind about the active participation of citizens in the policy process seem to have more impact in the system too. Meanwhile, they often prefer to disclose the process of policy-making before the actual decisions are taken – thereby allowing popular control on the local policies. Councillors' personal network and motivations also determine their representative style. Councillors who have many contacts outside the city hall prefer a more popular interpretation of their mandate, as do councillors who were inspired by lay motives. Councillors who tend to mingle with the actors inside the city hall, and councillors who were driven by professional motives, adopt a more elitist style of representation.

Somehow surprisingly, the size of the municipality does not impact systematically upon the role and position of councillors in the system. More variance stems from the region of the municipality, be it often in terms of councillors' attitude towards the office, rather than their (acclaimed) behaviour. Meanwhile in Flanders, the non-executive councillors experience their situations as even more problematic than in Wallonia. Party groups succeed less in emancipating the councillors and the municipal administration is deemed to have more impact in the system.

Moving one step further, we might ask ourselves whether such results are unique to the Belgian setting *per se*. Again, the answer to the question is double. For instance, the discrepancy between what councillors aspire to do in office and what they subsequently engage in, has been documented by Rao (1998) as a common and historical pattern in the political system of the United Kingdom as well. It is by no means exceptional, Rao (1998) contends, that councillors have to adopt a more pragmatic attitude in office – despite preferring the representative role over the complementary role as policy-maker. Indeed, for many councillors, the practical focus of the office lies on mere council

business as such. Furthermore, we have to realize that a certain degree of differentiation within the political system seems to have become inevitable in the current intricate and demanding governance context. From this follows that the *ordinary*, lay councillors will always find it hard in any system to occupy the top spot in the local hierarchy. In this sense, it is not a coincidence that also in the Netherlands and France, councillors reckon that political leadership, and often even the municipal administration, outweigh laymen-politicians in the local authority. The role discrepancy that many of these non-executive councillors have to endure is a further signal of the complexity of the office for that matter. So too is the trend of increasing personal calibre and the apparent reluctance to share true decision-making powers with citizens outside the political arena.

Nevertheless, what is unique to the Belgian situation is the magnitude and the significance of the discrepancy between the formal rules of the game and their informal application in practice. In fact, a seemingly large group of councillors are systematically placed outside the established circles of authority. Particularly in the role as policy-maker, the average local councillor in Belgium falls short of formal expectations. This means that in practice, the layman rule is largely fictitious. And even though this does not automatically seem to induce higher levels of turnover as such, it is reflected in the frequency with which councillors mention a lack of influence as a possible reason to turn their back on the council. This is even more the case than in France, a country in which “*everything seems to have been designed to ensure the continuity of the mayor’s power*” (Kerrouche, 2005: 150), and laymen are consequently subjected to the dictates of the latter (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). Meanwhile, the pattern sharpens in the contrast with the Netherlands, a country that formally shares the collective-form and corresponding layman rule with Belgium, but in which these principles seem to accord clearly more with the situation in the field.

Such a conclusion gives food for thought. First of all, it holds obvious consequences for the councillors as actors on the micro-level of the political system. On one hand, they are not complete fragments of local democracy. Many elements (e.g. motivations, social connections, the conception of the mandate and the role attitudes) still support the image of the councillors as vital elements of a democratic system *at the outset*. Yet on the other hand, a large majority of the councillors are definitely not a foundation of democracy either. These councillors are placed in situations in which they are often compelled to ritually legitimize or criticize decisions that have already been made elsewhere and beforehand (Reynaert et al., 2010). Referring back to the metaphor of the general introduction in *Chapter 1*: councillors are perhaps seated in the *Kokpit* of their municipality, but it is very likely that this is just the cockpit of the flight simulator. The real decisions are often taken in the meetings of the executive board, the party headquarters and even the municipal administration behind the scenes.

Under these circumstances, joining the inner circle of the municipality might actually be the best guarantee for *ordinary* councillors to increase their impact on local affairs. On the pretext of the age-old saying *if you can't beat them, joint them*, this is probably why as many councillors aspire to higher office as there are councillors who wish to abandon the council. The prospect, or sometimes even the explicit or implicit promise, of an executive function in the future might work as a motivation for councillors to fulfil their office in the best possible way – but also to oblige them to toe the party line. Nonetheless, such practice is hard to reconcile with the basic, present principles of our system that place the role of the average lay councillors first. It seems unfair and frustrating for councillors who are deprived of such prospects, or who simply wish to be the best councillor that they can be too. Moreover, the practice evokes the image of politics as the typical art of wheeling and dealing, needed to rise in the local power hierarchy.

As stated in the introduction, this standpoint was aptly reiterated by the director of the Flemish association of cities and municipalities: *“The main goal of one's political commitment should be to become a strong councillor, not an alderman. We should, therefore, revalue this role and function instead of conceiving it as a steppingstone to an executive office”* (Suykens, 2012: 9, translated quote from Dutch). Meanwhile, Suykens (2012) emphasizes the crucial responsibility of political parties on this subject. Belgian parties have collectively reduced their efforts to train and support councillors in recent decades. Such cutbacks contrast sharply with the parties' massive financial investments during the electoral campaigns. According to the author, therefore, it is imperative that parties assume their responsibility for the counsel and support of councillors once they have been elected³.

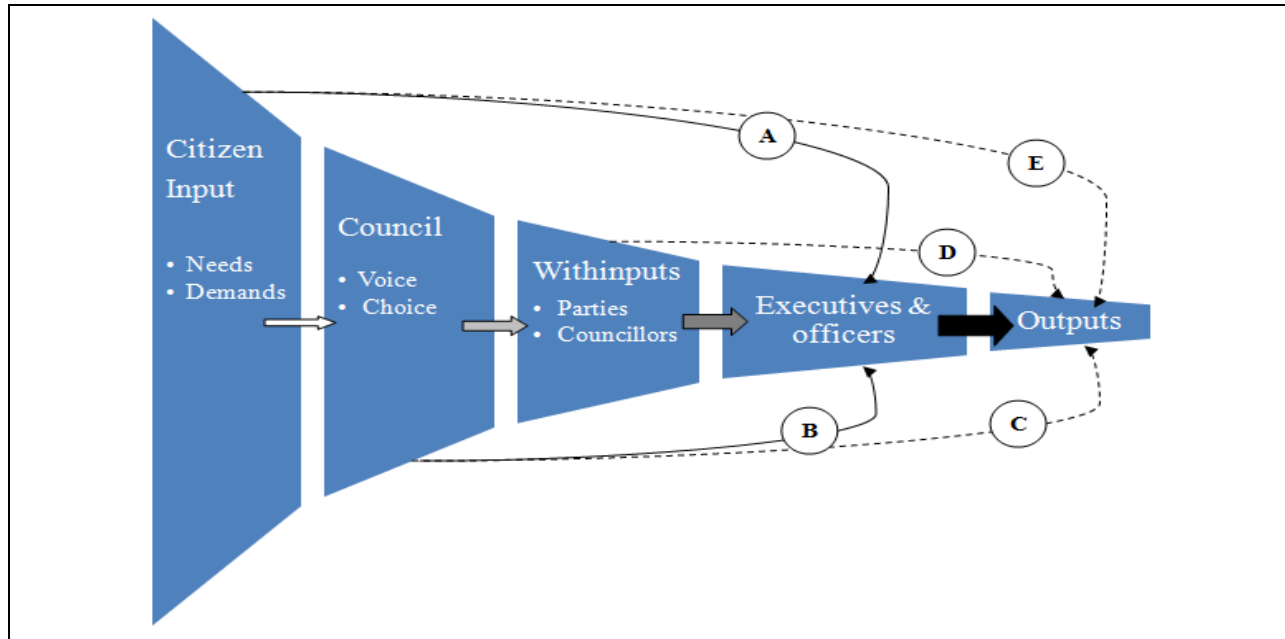
A second, and at least equally important, question is how our conclusions on the micro-level bear more generally upon the state of the political system on the macro-level. Basically, we have sketched the latter as the set of structures and procedures designed to convert input from the locality into policy output in the most democratic, transparent and efficient way. De Rynck (2007) describes the prevalent representative system as a funnel that clusters, reduces and simplifies demands from the locality. It thereby steers the (political) mobilization of the masses. Our study underlines that in the Belgian system, this funnel tends to work by means of three fundamental, in-built filters.

The first filter refers to the selectivity in the recruitment process. The selection of elected representatives in the council is certainly not a perfect mirror of the locality. And the *cracks* in the mirror (see Andeweg, 2003) do not have a random pattern either. Consequently at the outset, the expression of local voice and the exercise of local choice

³ The Dutch case, for instance, shows that the party group might be the first and proper step to empower councillors vis-à-vis the executive branch. Meanwhile, this responsibility adds to the necessity of parties to raise their efforts in the recruitment process.

(could) already narrow down the focus of the council. Second, these elected councillors do not act as strict agents from the locality, merely conveying their inputs into the system. In practice, councillors and political parties regularly set the local agenda. Such *withinputs* leave their mark on both the process and its outputs. Whereas these may still originate from the aggregation and selection of particular inputs from society, they may as well stem from the sheer personal initiative of councillors and parties. Third, it is foremost the executive board, working in close harmony with the municipal administration, that decides which inputs ultimately complete the policy process. Often, the actual policy outputs even result from the initiative of the latter via *withinputs* too. Considering the extra degree of selectivity in this group of actors (in numerical, but also socio-demographic and professional terms), we can imagine that the representative funnel becomes quite narrow at the end.

We have attempted to visualize this process in Figure 7.1 below. The figure illustrates how citizen input is processed via the three critical filters into policy output. It also indicates how the funnel narrows at every stage. Meanwhile, the impact of each filter, expressed by the size and colour of the central arrows, intensifies as the process proceeds. Such a process clearly disrupts the balance of the political regime as it has been formally designed. First, some fundamental principles and values (e.g. equality, layman rule, representativeness) have become largely obsolete. Second, formal rules (e.g. councillors running the system by means of their triple role-set) give way to informal counterparts (e.g. parties leaving their mark on the process, executives taking command in co-operation with the administration). Third and as a consequence, the authority structure of the local regime has been turned upside down. In the end, this situation confirms the following claim of Larsen (2005: 200), posed in the introduction of our study: *“Sometimes, only a handful of politicians have enough information and oversight to be able to exert real influence.”*

Figure 7.1. The political system in Belgium

What could be the further implications of this situation for the system? Arguably, it could place the democratic and functional performance of the system under pressure. Indeed, much power is concentrated in the hands of a very particular, selective and professional local elite. At the same time, this elite is not directly elected by the people in the first place, nor firmly kept in check by the representative body later on. Apart from the informal rules of the game, the power base of this elite can also thrive on some structural features of the system such as the length of the term in office and the unlimited number of terms in office allowed. The *closed* character of decision-making, in combination with reduced popular input and a lack of popular control, may end up in creating output failures. Over the long haul, it could also lead to citizens challenging the legitimacy of the local outputs, or even the legitimacy of the political system on the whole. According to Keane (2009), this is exactly what is happening in many democratic systems at present. For Keane, the quintessence of democracy is that it prevents undemocratic rule by a small elite that wields abundant power. In other words, the concept is understood as “*government of the humble, by the humble, for the humble*” (Keane, 2009: vii). The representative variant of democracy was not just the practical solution to the impossibility of systematically involving every citizen in the political process. It was also an ideological means of creating humble and good government by rotating political leadership. However, the author feels that “*democracies as we know them are sleepwalking their way into deep trouble*” (Keane, 2009: xxxii). If people are disgruntled with politics nowadays, then this is basically directed at typical party government and its

machinations. Instead of serving the people, parties and their politicians are perceived as mainly pursuing their own agenda, holding the representative process in a *stranglehold*. The result is a system under strain, as outlined in the introductory chapter: social inequality and market failure are combined with declining support in terms of party membership, turnout and disrespect for politicians and the system.

This is exactly what seems to have gone wrong in the Belgian system. Local government is no longer government *by the humble*. A small and selective elite has gained excessive power whilst the councillors, forming the institution that has been appointed to preserve the balance between democratic and efficient governance, do not succeed in living up to their high formal and normative standards. This is why the discussion about councillors' role and position in the system matters from a democratic point of view. A healthy local system forms the basis of our democracy. It is the political arena in which people place the most trust while it deals with matters that affect their daily lives. And in its current plan, councillors are conceived as the infantrymen of this system. Becoming a councillor is also still the shortest way to a *systematic* personal commitment to the political system. To put it in the words of Stewart (1991: 26), therefore: "*The case for the councillors' role as an elected representative rests on the need for local democracy.*"

Nonetheless, it seems necessary to somehow nuance the general picture painted above. If we borrow Laswell's definition of politics as deciding on "*who gets what, when and how*" (quoted in Devos, 2006a: 18), it goes without saying that the result of this process can never be *everybody gets everything, immediately, in the most optimal way*. So policy outputs are bound to be the answer to a particular selection of policy inputs anytime. This selection is also determined by the general context, the available means and possible constraints in place. Besides, the multitude, and often inconsistency, of contemporary values and demands, the unpredictable nature of the political agenda, the time it takes for inputs to pass through the process: these elements all lead to outputs that are seldom perfectly in tune with the initial inputs. The function of the political system is exactly to make the most appropriate choices then. And even if the Belgian system works quite selectively indeed, we must not *a priori* dismiss its value and capacity. For instance, it is possible that a selective group of people actually make the best decisions from an objective and/or technical point of view. *Withinputs* such as party programs or councillor standpoints might concur with the needs from the locality too. In this sense, it is important that most councillors remain embedded in the social life of their local community. Moreover, informal contacts and formal structures (e.g. advisory boards) still provide input to the system. This is why a selective policy-making process could end up producing outputs that meet the initial policy needs and demands after all.

Furthermore, councillors' subordination to the political leaders and professional administration does not necessarily imply that they have *no* impact at all. The central path

that we have drawn in Figure 7.1 leaves some room for input to pass from society over the council and the BMA and administration to the output end of the process. Additionally, the central path is no blueprint that fits every context or every process of decision-making either. In fact, Figure 7.1 also shows that there are possible deviations from the typical, central path of decision-making. Via these alternative routes councillors can give a meaningful contribution to the system. Simultaneously, they offer alternative ways to the citizens to advocate their needs and demands in the system. In each of these alternative paths, which could obviously intermingle in practice, one or more of the classic filters are bypassed.

Path A and B are probably the most common alternatives to the central way of decision-making. In these paths, the *withinputs* from the elected representatives or parties are bypassed as a filter in the process. Path A suggests that it might be more rewarding for citizens to influence policy outputs by turning directly to the executive board and/or administration with demands or requests⁴. In path B, citizen input is processed by the system with the council acting as a mere conduit between the locality and the executive board and administration. The latter, then, dominate the elaboration and implementation of the policy outputs as they are used to do in the central path.

As indicated by the striped lines, the next two paths could be less likely to occur in practice. Path C and D propose a more active role for the council and the councillors. In path C, councillors take the initiative to transpose demands from the locality in policy outputs without the BMA or administration dominating the process. Path D sees councillors as even more active players who develop and administer the policy agenda quite autonomously. Arguably, these paths bear closer resemblance to the ideal-typical conception of the Belgian representative local system driven by the layman rule. They emphasize the actions, initiative and preponderance of the councillors to the detriment of the executive board and the administration as strong filters in the process. Councillors can follow these paths, for instance, by setting the agenda, convening the council, voting and appointing members to certain positions against the will of the executives. They might also overrule the aldermen in the party group. In Wallonia, the use of the constructive no-confidence vote could be the most drastic example of councillors' direct impact in the system.

Path E, finally, represents the shortest and most direct way of transmitting input into output. In this path, the three classic filters are eliminated, and citizens exert a direct impact on the policy outputs. Possible examples are neighbourhood committees, forms of participatory budgeting or advisory referenda that might have the moral authority of

⁴ Many executives organize or institutionalize this path by holding office hours in order to stay in touch with the local community. When stretched to the extremes, however, this path could lead to excesses of *clientelism*.

binding decisions in practice. This path does not exclude the fact that at some point in the process, the intervention or contribution of the BMA, council and/or administration could be required (e.g. setting the framework and conditions of the procedures; facilitating, counselling, organizing and implementing the outputs, etc.). The path does not necessarily have to occur completely on its own either – as it may be used to complement other forms of decision-making. Nonetheless, the main emphasis of the path lies on the direct link between citizens and policy outputs. Accordingly, path E blurs the boundaries of the traditional political system and represents a hybrid form of democracy in which representative and participative elements blend together.

7.3. DISCUSSION: REFLECTIONS ON SOME FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

In the previous section, we have drawn a mixed picture of the Belgian local councillors. Despite positive signals at the outset and alternative paths later on, the common way of decision-making tends to neglect or side-line many of them as fundamental players in the political system. The next step in this conclusive chapter is to link our conclusions to the normative debate that underpinned the study in the first place. On the basis of what we now know, we may ask: What are the most plausible and/or viable perspectives with regard to the role and position of local councillors in the Belgian local system? We have selected and wish to explore three broad, tentative perspectives. Albeit we will discuss them separately, they can obviously (partly) co-exist or overlap in practice. Basically, the perspectives range from the current line of thought over a more radical variant to a fundamental revision of the role and position of the local councillors in the political system. We hint at the possible advantages and drawbacks of each perspective, their rate of success or failure. It is obvious, however, that such reflections can neither be exhaustive nor generally valid and/or predictive. This is why our discussion does not aspire to propound *the* ultimate or best solution in the end.

7.3.1. The incremental path: institutional renovation

A first possible perspective is the incremental path forward. Incrementalism is a *safe way* of decision-making in which policies build step by step on existing practice (Lindblom in De Rynck, 2006). The goal of this method is not so much to reach the ultimate solution as it is to reach the most possible or most feasible solution. The method is often applied when information and/or resources are scarce, or when excessive risks need to be avoided. Other advantages of the method include faster processes of decision-making combined with lower levels of political opposition or controversy.

In the context of our research, an incremental path implies that central governments continue their current attempts at institutional *renovation*. They hold on to the classic values and principles of the political system and install new formal rules in order to take the edge off the informal rules of the game and restore the formal authority structure in the local regime. Going back to the metaphor of the local councillors as infantrymen of local democracy, the perspective involves a rearmament of the troops on the ground to improve their strike power. According to this metaphor, modern soldiers are no longer equipped with swords, spears, helmets or bayonets anymore. The contemporary G.I. uses modern information techniques, long-distance weapons and high-tech material. Simultaneously, ancient marching columns have been replaced with agile platoons that are internally diversified and specialized.

If we transpose this metaphor to the more peaceful setting of the current local system in Belgium, we see that the different regions have already taken a number of steps in this direction. Both local councillors and local councils are equipped with several instruments that could improve their impact in the system. These vary from individual agenda setting rights, (electronic) information and inspection rights, delegation rights, inquiry rights, visitation of municipal services and institutions, to the collective organization of standing committees, a (more) flexible regulation to convene the council, citizen consultation procedures, a committee to organize the (scrutiny on the) policies of formal governance arrangements⁵, support for party groups, an ethical code of conduct, the election of a council and committee president, reducing the number of aldermen, a constructive no-confidence vote, a procedure to restore the governability when there is a permanent conflict in the executive board, etc. Councillors thus (may) have modern instruments at their disposal. There is a possibility to consult, study and prepare dossiers from home. They may also focus on certain policies in-depth via committees and the internal organization of their party group⁶.

For the moment, however, it is difficult (and, given the recent introduction of some instruments, probably still too early) to assess the true impact of these provisions. If we assemble the scattered evidence that is available, it turns out that many of the collective instruments are not always used that frequently (yet). In Flanders, for instance, research shows that there are still (often smaller) municipalities that do not even succeed in organizing the minimal number of council meetings, i.e. ten per year (Vlabest, 2011). Approximately 60% of the municipalities have established standing committees, yet only seldom is a member of the opposition entitled to preside over these committees (Olislagers et al., 2008). An ethical code of conduct and delegation rights were found in

⁵ These are the so-called *municipal satellites* that include, for example, inter-municipal co-operations, municipal agencies, etc.

⁶ At the same time, however, Heywood (2002) points at a possible disadvantage of standing committees as a further degree of internal selectivity.

60-70% of the municipalities (Olislagers et al., 2008) while personal support for the party groups is the exception rather than the rule (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010). In Wallonia, both the individual and collective constructive no-confidence votes have been applied just about ten times thus far (Matagne et al., 2011). The motives and consequences (e.g. replacing one alderman, replacing the mayor, replacing the entire BMA, installing a new political majority) of this intervention were usually quite divergent and context-bound.

Lastly, the number of municipalities in which the mayor no longer presides over the council had amounted to well over one-third of the total landscape by the end of the legislature⁷. Still this new institution might lack a genuine statute and sufficient support and visibility to make a real difference (Suykens, 2010; Vlabest, 2011). Whereas it is used to empower the council in some municipalities, others have included the office in the typical package of wheeling and dealing between and within parties of the majority during the coalition formation. The presidency is offered, then, as a consolation prize to councillors who missed out on an executive mandate (Suykens, 2010). Nevertheless, this does not exclude the fact that the council presidency is a position with at least some prestige. Some presidents have also clearly grown in their function. And it seems that mainly councillors from the opposition are satisfied with a strong council president (Vlabest, 2011).

Other studies have mapped out councillors' personal evaluations of their instruments and the political situations. Flemish councillors do not seem to believe that the *Municipal Decree* has truly enforced the impact of the council in the political system already (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010). Some of the instruments (e.g. oral questions, information) are used more frequently than others (e.g. written questions, visiting municipal institutions, agenda-setting). Yet councillors are not under the impression that the *Municipal Decree* has led to a substantial increase in the use of these instruments too (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010). Our study has shown that the evaluation of the effectiveness of these instruments, which is fairly positive in general, is also related to the classic power hierarchy between the executive board, majority and opposition.

Hence, it remains to be seen whether the current set of instruments will prove sufficient to re-invigorate the councils and councillors in the political system. Time is always a crucial variable when assessing the true impact of such structural reforms (Putnam in Steen & Wille, 2005). This is why authors expect that the effects of the institutional reforms in Belgium could become more clear over time (Steen & Wille, 2005; Pilet, 2008; Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Suykens, 2010). Indeed, old habits do not change overnight.

⁷ In the new legislature, this ratio is even 2:3 in Flanders.

Yet if government would choose to elaborate on this incremental path, some further measures seem advisable, and perhaps even imperative (Suykens, 2010; Vlabest, 2011): the use of brief and accessible documents in the council; a better statute and support for the council president (in terms of remuneration, social statute, logistic help, personal assistance, etc.); increasing the efforts of recruiting and training councillors, etc. In addition to these instruments, the introduction of a full-blown social and political statute for the councillors is often believed to be the most necessary lever for change (Steen & Wille, 2005; Suykens, 2010; Vlabest, 2011). The underlying idea is that strong and competent councillors would be able to stand their ground vis-à-vis the mayor, aldermen and administrators in the system. The councillor statute could include more possibilities for political leave, standard personal and logistic support, a part-time statute in larger municipalities, a diversified remuneration system depending, for instance, on permanent formation and education, etc.⁸. In the current context of economic and financial austerity, however, it is doubtful whether there is enough financial room to implement and sustain such reforms on a large scale.

What are the further odds that such changes will or would achieve the intended outcome? In short: “*effective institutional change requires more than merely changing the rules of the game*” (De Groot, 2009: 198)⁹. Denters and Klok (2003) apply the model of Kiser and Ostrom to single out the different steps in the process of effective institutional change. The first and basic step is the permeation of the formal reforms in the minds of the actors involved. Councillors should *understand* the reforms while being *willing* and *able* to adapt their behaviour in the proposed direction. If institutional reforms are not accompanied by widespread information and uniform elucidation of the new rules and their expected outcomes, the implementation of the reforms will often be “*a self-directed organizational learning process*”, in which every actor makes up his own mind over the intended effects (Steen & Wille, 2005: 462)¹⁰. Central government should pay careful attention to this precondition. It should also try to maximize councillors’ willingness to change their behaviour (De Groot, 2009). This part of the attitude can be determined by taking into account the concerns of the councillors in the first place and emphasizing subjective norms (i.e. the perceived social pressure to adapt behaviour, resulting from the questions “*How should I behave?*”, but also “*Do I care?*”, see Ajzen in De Groot, 2009:

⁸ In practice, regional governments also have to take it into account that substantial parts of this statute (e.g. pension, social security, tax law) still fall within the jurisdiction of federal government (Steen & Wille, 2005; Reynaert & Steyvers, 2006).

⁹ According to the author, the first step of effective reform is always thoroughly considering the specific behavioural aspects that a government seeks to change, before carefully selecting instruments that can help to achieve this goal.

¹⁰ Flemish councillors generally claim that they understand the basic ideas of the *Municipal Decree*. Nevertheless, the scholars feel that social desirability and biased response might partly account for this result (Olislagers et al., 2009).

56). As regards this component, we have found that councillors at least endorse their role and position in the system. Still it is doubtful, for instance, whether they are willing to completely give up the very specific and often rewarding casework (from a personal and electoral point of view) to the detriment of *strategic*, general policy-making (see also De Rynck, 2002; Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010). Meanwhile, formation, education and the introduction of complementary resources could help councillors to develop the necessary capacities or ability to transpose their attitude into analogous behaviour¹¹. Our analysis suggests that education and experience can indeed be potential triggers for effective role behaviour. Yet at the same time, these capacities could bring about a further degree of selectivity in the overall council composition¹². This is why educating and, above all, supporting councillors *in office* might be a good way of empowering the *ordinary* councillors who, then, do not need to be and/or become genuine politicians or professionalized councillors (see also Vlabest, 2011)¹³.

The second step in the process is that the actors must actually change their behaviour. Our results imply that there is still a long way to go before councillors (are able to) systematically adapt their behaviour. This also affects the third and final step of effective institutional change. Changes of the individual behaviour should produce different results, thereby altering the political system. In order to restore the authority structure of the Belgian local system, the key question is whether the present and proposed instruments will be sufficient to fundamentally alter the dominant and deep-seated informal decision-making culture (see also Steen & Wille, 2005; Pilet, 2008; De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010; Dezeure & De Rynck, 2010; Wayenberg et al., 2010). Indeed, while councillors might be informed, willing and capable to change their behaviour, the informal rules of the game could still stand in their way to effectively do so.

Without a doubt, cutting across typical party discipline and executive dominance will be an exhaustive work. In this sense, the fact that the statute of mayors and aldermen has already been improved further underlines “*the Belgian tradition of marginalizing the role of the councillors and the council*” (Wayenberg et al., 2010: 87; see also De Rynck & Wayenberg, 2010). And combining the re-invigoration of the council(lors) with the reinforcement of political leadership and administrative management, might actually lead towards a form of *Matteüs-effect*. This implies that those who already wield much power

¹¹ This was framed by Ajzen (in De Groot, 2009: 56) as the “*perceived behaviour control*”, i.e. the perception of the councillor that he/she has (powerful) instruments at his/her disposal to change behaviour.

¹² Accordingly, reducing the gap between councillors and executives/officers might enlarge the gap between the council and the local community at large.

¹³ In the Netherlands, for example, the administrative support for the councillors was explicitly intended to empower the councillors as policy makers while leaving enough room for representative task fulfilment as lay politicians (Steen & Wille, 2005).

profit more from the reforms than those who were less influential at the outset¹⁴. Besides, it is important to realize that many of the council instruments (e.g. establishing committees, electing a council president, formation programs, support for party groups) are merely *facultative* – and thus depend on the goodwill of the political majority, i.e. the parties and the executive board. Others fall at least partly under the responsibility of the political parties too (e.g. recruiting and training candidates and councillors).

Once again, this confirms the ambivalent role of the political parties in the system. They are at the same time part of the problem and part of the solution. Parties may actively recruit, train and support candidates. They may empower councillors and alleviate the pressure on their individual shoulders by working as a close party group. But on the other hand, parties should leave enough space for individual initiative, free debate and independent vote. Indeed, excessive party politics is exactly the object of much public dissatisfaction and mistrust with the political system (De Rynck, 2002 and 2012; Keane, 2009)¹⁵. Concerning this discussion, the Flemish advisory council for interior affairs has expressed its concern that the support for party groups, instead of single councillors or the council as a whole, might actually enhance party discipline even more (Steen & Wille, 2005; Reynaert & Steyvers, 2006). And in Wallonia, scholars point out that the system of the constructive no-confidence vote also secures the influence of parties. First, executive councillors who speak or act (too) independently from the official party line face the constant threat of retaliation through the no-confidence vote of their party (Pilet, 2008). Second, this is underpinned by the stipulation in the Walloon *Code* that councillors who are elected on a party list are considered to be members of the party group for the entire legislature when casting a no-confidence vote (hence, even if they have resigned from their party group). This renders the constructive no-confidence vote a powerful tool for party groups, rather than for single councillors (Matagne et al., 2011). Matagne et al. (2011) feel that this logic is hard to reconcile with the very nature of local politics, in which coherent party programs are less important than individual personalities¹⁶.

¹⁴ In the same line of thinking, many Flemish councillors are reluctant to delegate matters of daily governance to the executive board (Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010). Another example is the management-oriented style of the Flemish *Municipal Decree* (De Rynck, 2012). Whereas control and report mechanisms, audits and strategic planning could spur councillors to become modern policy-makers, the management model (e.g. the *Policy-and-Management-Cycle*) could also exacerbate the pressure on these lay politicians, creating more space for professional administrators and political leaders to step in, and dominate, the process.

¹⁵ According to De Winter and Dumont (2006), excessive party government ultimately leads to output failure as well.

¹⁶ Still, the authors admit that this does not impede that party groups can oppose internally. In this case, the most influential part of the party group is pulling the strings.

This last point brings us to our final remark on the incremental path. In the end, politics remains a form of social action, led and determined by personalities and interpersonal relations. Such highly subjective, cultural and context-bound traits were difficult to scrutinize via our large-scale standard survey¹⁷. Still we did find that councillors' contact pattern impinges on the way in which they conceive, and subsequently claim to fulfil, their mandate. Going one step further, it is likely that personal styles and relationships delineate the contours of councillors' room for manoeuvre as well. Probably more than any other government level, the local political system thrives on personal contacts: contacts in the BMA, contacts between the BMA and the council, contacts between journalists and councillors, the mayor and executives, contacts between councillors across party boundaries, contacts with citizens and social groups, contacts with the CEO and the administration, etc. Obviously, this adds further to the unpredictability of the modest institutional renovation path (and by extension any other path of reform).

7.3.2. The 'municipal big bang': institutional revolution

The second future perspective pursues the same basic goal, namely empowering councillors as key actors in the political system through institutional reform. Yet the way to get there differs substantially from the previous one. For some, incrementalism or the art of "*muddling through*" (Lindblom in De Rynck, 2006: 444) might take too much time, or might even not suffice at all, to achieve this basic goal. As long as executives remain an integral part of the council, meanwhile pulling the strings in the influential party (group), the solution might not be to rely solely on the instruments outlined above. What could be needed, instead, is a municipal big bang, a drastic reform or *revolution*.

For an example of such a drastic attempt to remedy the skewed or even inverted power balance in the council, we can turn to the Dutch case. Before 2002, the Netherlands were considered to be a classic case of reversed monism too (Bakker et al., 1999, see also Elzinga, 1998; Tops & Zouridis, 2002; Denters & Klok, 2003; Steen & Wille, 2005 and Denters et al., 2005; see also *Chapter 6*). The presence of the aldermen in the council and the party groups had turned the local authority structure upside down. As a result, the formal layman rule was overruled by executive and professional dominance. These traits made the Dutch system highly reminiscent of the current Belgian one. Yet in contrast with the Belgian incremental path, the Netherlands chose to take drastic measures by altering the *fundamentals* of the system. One of the main objectives was to increase councillors' operational room for manoeuvre and reduce the excesses of party

¹⁷ This is, for instance, probably a reason why our analytical regression models seldom wielded very strong explanatory power.

government and executive supremacy¹⁸. Indeed, the *Dualism Act* of 2002 radically and formally separated the executive board from the council as legislative authority. Aldermen are now potentially recruited from outside the council while being appointed and, if necessary, dismissed by the council. They no longer take part in council (or council committee) debates (unless they are inquired by the council). They are no longer allowed to vote on local policies. And often, aldermen no longer attend the meetings of their party group either. In addition to this structural separation of authorities, the council received new instruments such as an administrative clerk, an audit court and annual citizen reports. Taken together, this reform was intended to reinvigorate the council and its councillors in the three classic roles of representing local issues and demands, determining the main goals of the local policy, and controlling the latter's implementation.

The effects of the reforms seem divergent. Some authors underline the democratic problems caused by the difficult relation between council and executive (i.e. the so-called *duelism*, Steen & Wille, 2005; Steen & Toonen, 2010). Besides, Denters et al. (2008) and De Groot (2009) have found that councillors have not (yet) fundamentally improved their representative input role thus far. On the other hand, the authors did perceive an amelioration of their output roles, and their position in the local authority. The authors consequently conclude that the impact of the council has increased. In any case, the reform has clearly separated the roles in the local system (Pruim, 2010). Executives no longer take their supremacy in the council, coalition or party group for granted. The council, on its turn, can steer the municipality, but in order to do so, it has to act more as a collective body in some cases to oppose the BMA and the administration (Pruim, 2010). In our comparative analysis, the Dutch councillors also emerged as the most optimistic ones in terms of their impact in the system. So from the standpoint of the councillors, we might (carefully) call the Dutch reform a success (see also Pruim, 2010).

Let us now return to the Belgian setting. Under the above assumption, copying a similar reform in a similar context could produce similar results. This means that in addition to the existing instruments, new and radical reforms could be more effective to re-empower councils and councillors vis-à-vis the executives and political parties. Such reforms imply: a formal and radical (i.e. functional and personal) separation of the council and the executive board; inviting aldermen as mere *guests* (to illuminate policies) in the meetings of the party group; support for the council and councillors (instead of the party groups) by an independent office and officer; the systematic right to recall aldermen who lose the council's confidence; forbidding mayors or aldermen to preside over the council. Other possible instruments are: allowing the council to elect the mayor – as this would align

¹⁸ Simultaneously, the *Dualism Act* aimed at strengthening the executive board in its administrative responsibility (Steen & Toonen, 2010).

with the idea of formal council primacy (Reynaert & Steyvers, 2006); and electing less councillors who can be better trained and supported (De Rynck, 2012).

A final point concerns the impact and the contradictory role of the political parties. As part of the problem and part of the solution, parties could be strengthened and weakened at the same time (De Rynck, 2012). The first component entails investing in the local party branches in terms of recruitment, formation and support; and coupling party grants to party membership figures in order to promote the party's bond with the local community. In this way, parties could become the breeding ground for strong councillors in office. The second component should alleviate the pressure on the councillors to follow the dictates of their parties in the council. Ethical/deontological codes and internal council regulations are soft rules that can raise consciousness of democratic performance and role fulfilment. Yet they could also be accompanied by new formal rules of the game which seek to reduce party politics (e.g. allowing *panachage*, changing the electoral procedure in order to further decrease the impact of list votes, etc.). Meanwhile, systematically involving citizen input in the council (e.g. by advisory councils, public hearings, organizing neighbourhood information sessions, etc.) could help to reduce party government as well¹⁹. The plenary council meeting could then function as an open forum for broad public debate on all relevant social topics between the parties, stakeholders and citizens (De Rynck in Steyvers & Reynaert, 2003)²⁰.

Would this perspective be the optimal solution? Its radical approach has at least the advantage of formal *and* symbolic clarity. It would make an end to the current practice that holds the middle between *decapitated dualism* and *schizophrenic monism* (Steyvers & Reynaert, 2003; Reynaert & Steyvers, 2006). Indeed, while there are some dualistic clues at present (e.g. council president, delegation, constructive no-confidence vote), the core of the system has remained monistic (i.e. executives retaining their seat and vote in the council). Besides, this path also hands councillors more effective instruments to exercise their rights as key actors in the system.

On the other hand, we might think of some reasons to reject such a drastic revolution too. First, we should put our own *empirical* findings in the right perspective. At the moment of response (2007-2008), the Dutch reform had been implemented for some years already. Belgian reforms were more fresh. This means that time-effects might explain to some extent why Dutch councillors believe that they have more impact than Belgian

¹⁹ This function represents a broad interpretation of the classic input role of the councillors as *bridgehead* (i.e. mere spokespersons of the community), resembling a more proactive role as *democratic auditor* (Denters et al., 2008: 68).

²⁰ In fact, the council is, and *should* be, the arena for opposing and conflicting interests and visions of the local society. Council debates should therefore function as a gradual and mutual search for the common good. In this way, local policies will be able to build on broader public support afterwards (Pruim, 2010).

councillors. Furthermore, also Dutch councillors feel to be less influential than their executive board in the end. And like in Belgium, there is still a considerable group amongst them who fail to implement their role-set as they would wish to.

Second, there are some theoretical arguments against simply copy-pasting the Dutch model over onto the Belgian setting. Some might question the *desirability* of this practice. The Dutch example has shown how the system went through a period of *duelism* after the introduction of the *Dualism Act*²¹. This situation, along with the enhanced probability of turnover in the executive board, could form a risk for the stability of the local system. Besides, it could come at a high cost not just from a financial perspective, but from a democratic perspective too. In the Netherlands, dualism has drastically increased the amount of aldermen who are not popularly elected by the locality (Denters et al., 2005). Hence, restoring one link of the representative chain could simultaneously weaken another one. If the councillors would (still) fail to effectively steer and control the executive, dualism might further boost the technocratic and elitist character of local government. Another argument in the Belgian context is that the disconnection of the BMA and the council could lead to high levels of absenteeism amongst the aldermen in the council (Steen & Wille, 2005).

In addition to the above argument, one could also wonder if the Dutch institutional revolution is *feasible* in the Belgian context. Steen and Wille (2005) see the overarching contextual setting as one of the most important conditions for effective institutional change. As we have stated before, the Belgian and Dutch local context bear many similarities. However, they also differ in a number of traits. Unlike the Netherlands, the political culture of Belgian local government is, for instance, characterized by its *political localism*. The concept implies that the municipalities' lack of autonomy in functional public service delivery is compensated for by immediate access to the central level(s) of decision-making via multiple office-holding and political parties colonizing the centre (Wayenberg et al., 2010; Steyvers, 2012)²². In Belgium, the central governments that have the discretion to modify the local system (e.g. in a dualistic direction) are consequently studded with councillors who hold an executive office at the local level on the side²³. This could explain why there is no broad basis (or willingness) to support a dualistic local government structure in Belgium. Indeed, the decision to empower councillors (partly at the expense of the executives) has to be taken by actors who are often directly involved in, or would be strongly affected by, the reform. Therefore, one

²¹ On the other hand, this was not the case in every municipality either. Moreover, this *duelism* could fade away over time. Pruim (2010), for example, compares *duelism* with the necessary phase of puberty on the system's road to maturity.

²² In the Netherlands, such multiple office holding is prohibited.

²³ Many councillors even explicitly justify their supra-local mandate by claiming that it allows them to better advocate the interests of their municipality on a higher level.

thing seems for sure: the institutional big bang would not come without political controversy.

Furthermore, there are some other cultural differences between the Netherlands and Belgium. On the cultural plan, for instance, Dutch councils already boasted a stronger tradition of debate before the reform (Kalk & De Rynck, 2003). This reflects a political culture in the Netherlands which is marked by more horizontal power relations, and which is underpinned by a tradition of systematic and transparent public governance (De Rynck, 2012)²⁴. Accordingly, scholars reckon that the introduction of dualism entailed a less drastic censure with the past in the Netherlands than it would do in Belgium (Steyvers & Reynaert, 2003; Steen & Toonen, 2010). In Belgium, dualism would in fact require a radical change of mind and culture, which could be “*far too drastic to be realistic*” (Steen & Wille, 2005: 464). Belgium scores higher on Hofstede’s *uncertainty avoidance index* than the Netherlands too (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Steen & Wille, 2005). Hence, Belgian councillors should be more inclined to adhere to the (*in casu*: informal) rules of the game than Dutch councillors. This obedient nature probably explains another difference between both countries: the higher degree of party government and, particularly, party discipline in Belgium (Kalk & De Rynck, 2003; Steyvers & Reynaert, 2003; De Rynck, 2012)²⁵. Some authors doubt if dualism would be a watertight guarantee for the decrease of party discipline in Belgium (Steyvers & Reynaert, 2003). Regarding the latter, our analyses suggest that while Dutch parties succeed more in empowering their councillors in office, Belgian parties rather use their impact to keep councillors under the thumb as loyal party soldiers (see *Chapter 6*)²⁶.

Our final remark relates to the structural differences between the two countries. A democratic and effective dualistic system requires capable councillors and financial strength to sustain the accompanying instruments. Given the larger scale of its local government and the emphasis on governmental power (*bestuurskracht*), the Dutch system seems to rely on a more fertile soil and a larger recruitment pool for this²⁷. Lastly, there is an important difference with regard to the figure of the mayor (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). In the Netherlands, the mayor (who is appointed instead of elected) is expected to maintain the relations between the council and the BMA (Steen & Wille, 2005). Such a neutral or mediating role is difficult to imagine in the Belgian setting, where the mayor is

²⁴ Still both countries score quite high on Hofstede’s *index of power distance* (i.e. the acceptance of the power hierarchy in an organization) (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002; Steen & Wille, 2005).

²⁵ In the Netherlands, on the other hand, the impact of the professional administration is believed to be stronger (Kalk & De Rynck, 2003). This has been confirmed in our comparative analysis in terms of the impact of the heads of departments (but not the CEO).

²⁶ However, executives might not only profit from party discipline, but could (partly) impose it as well.

²⁷ The structural and systematic approach to the councillor office in the Netherlands is exemplified by the genuine councillor profiles that have been developed (e.g. *Vernieuwingsimpuls Dualisme en lokale democratie*).

the political forerunner, the face of the municipality and the leader of the political majority²⁸.

7.3.3. Alternative scenarios: rethinking the role and position of local councillors in the twenty-first century

The third and final perspective takes a different approach. Essentially, both the incremental path and its drastic alternative pursue the noble goal of restoring (or, perhaps from a more realistic standpoint: introducing) the layman rule. In the current state of affairs, however, one could wonder if it is realistic at all to expect layman politicians to steer the semi-professional political leaders and the professional administration in a system that is driven by party government, professionalization and executive supremacy. Aiming at harmonizing these informal rules with the formal rules of the game is, then, like fighting a losing battle. Moreover, is this goal not outdated in the current context of local democracy altogether? Many of the instruments and reforms of the previous perspectives are products of the classic, normative line of thinking about the political system. This vision stems from the heydays of representative democracy, which rested on the premise that the local system was to run democratically, transparently and efficiently on the basis of representative principles (e.g. free and fair elections, political representation, layman rule, equality), a local regime comprised of hierarchical local government and in-house service provision, and a clearly defined authority structure (political primacy, electoral chain of command). In this system, each institution held a typical position and had a classic role to play (see *Chapter 1*).

Yet this situation has evolved over the past decades. To clarify our point, we can fall back on the metaphor of the local councillors as *infantrymen* of democracy again. From its earliest conception to the present day, the nature of warfare has almost taken a complete u-turn. The days of all-out man-to-man combat are largely in the past now. So is war between single nations with their traditional armies and strategies. More and more, the latter have made way for modern missions, tactics and techniques. Warfare as we presently know it entails information struggle, deployment of elite groups, air strikes and powerful long-distance weapons; training and supplying local militias; peacekeeping missions; building and maintaining strategic alliances with other states, organizations or local groups, etc. In this new context the typical image of the infantryman, marching courageously ahead to defend his nation's interests, seems a romantic idea of the past. Instead, soldiers play various roles depending on the demands of the situation in place:

²⁸ This exemplifies how the Belgian system (still) has many traits in common with the French system in terms of its local government structure (e.g. multiple office holding) *and* culture – which explains why it might be harder to introduce a drastic institutional reform such as dualism.

they are trainer, data assembler, tactical unit, negotiator, guard, peacekeeper, etc. And often just as a last resort, a smaller but optimally trained, equipped and supported army of infantrymen is called into action.

Arguably, we can draw a parallel between this image and the contemporary world of local democracy. As Keane (2009: xiv) argues, “*every turn of phrase, every custom and every institution of democracy as we know it is time-bound.*” No single democratic model was ever *set in stone*, or has *built-in historical guarantees* to remain the fixed, dominant paradigm. The very quality of the political system is that it can adapt itself to changing conditions in order to survive (Easton in Deschouwer, 1993). In recent decades, the political system has adapted itself indeed. The changes sought to both process the increasing demands and deal with the decreasing support from the modern community and wider environment (see *Chapter 1*). The result is that the dominant classic model of representative democracy has been called into question as the only and/or ultimate way to achieve democratic and efficient popular self-government. Several complementary forms (e.g. participatory democracy, network democracy, market democracy) have been added to blend together in a modern hybrid or pluralistic democratic system. According to Keane (2009), the end of the dominance of representative democracy even marks a major shift in the system. He distinguishes *monitory* democracy as the main paradigm for the future. This paradigm entails that power and the political order are publically monitored and scrutinized through a wide, diverse and variable range of public devices and institutions²⁹.

These new or complementary forms of democracy have one thing in common: they imply the inclusion of new authorities and rules in the political system and, ultimately, even create a new political regime. The fixed ways of the old regime of local government and its in-house service production, underpinned by (formal) layman rule and a clear electoral chain of command, are in the past. The new regime of local governance builds on different and/or additional principles and practices (see also *Chapter 1*). Hierarchy and standardization give way to flexibility and custom-made policies in networks that comprise several (types of) actors. Consequently, in the words of Hansen (2001: 119), we might wonder “*whether (...) efforts of ‘reinventing government’ are what is needed to meet the new challenges of political democracy and decision making at the local level.*” Should we not turn to alternative scenarios that might work better in the modern regime of local *governance*? Should councillors not operate as modern soldiers, adopting a variety of roles that are tailored to the requirements of the given context? In this modern

²⁹ As such, the old democratic paradigm of “*one person, one vote*” makes way for the modern variant “*one person, as many votes as interests, but only one vote in relation to each interest*” (Keane, 2009: 861). For Keane (2009), this is an effective way of humbling the dominant party-led model of the representative political system – as in fact the parties and their institutions remain a part of the new system too.

context, the macro-goals of the political system have remained unchanged, but the (understanding of the) best way to achieve them at the micro-level has not.

In such a pluralistic context, the main question is not how to restore the traditional political primacy of the local councillors, but how to reposition them in the new regime. Tuning the actions of the councillors in line with institutional renovations that respond to current public expectations may yield two major benefits (Tops & Zouridis, 2002). On one hand, it is likely to enhance the credibility and authority of the council(lors) – and consequently, increase public support for the system on the macro-level. On the other hand, it paves the way for a more productive, recognizable and interesting role fulfilment by the councillors on the micro-level too. What this comes down to in practice, is that the typical *political primacy* of the councillors (which is largely illusory at present anyway) is replaced by *political ultimacy* (Tops & Zouridis, 2002). Councillors should not be the sovereign rulers, but the servants of society in the contemporary and flexible political regime (see also Sørensen, 2006; De Rynck, 2012). In this way, democracy returns to being democracy *by the humble* again (Keane, 2009).

Our third perspective is an umbrella for such alternative (or complementary) scenarios. Many of them can be placed under the common denominator of *metagovernance*. Metagovernance (literally the governance of governance) qualifies as “*an indirect form of governing that is exercised by influencing various processes of self-governance*” (Sørensen, 2006: 100). The concept refers to the different roles that councillors can play in the new local governance regime, which in fact includes local government *plus* all sorts of governance networks that are part of the contemporary pluralistic democratic system. We can define such governance networks, therefore, quite broadly as “*public policy making and implementation through a web of relationships between government, business and civil society actors*” (Klijn, 2008: 511). They may include public-private partnerships, inter-municipal co-operations, networks of citizen participation, etc.

According to the academics, councillors’ metagovernance role is an important (although not sufficient)³⁰ precondition for, above all, the democratic proceedings of network decision-making (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005 and 2009)³¹. This need stems from the

³⁰ Other conditions for the democratic proceedings of governance networks may include incorporating more participants in the network; maximizing the publicity on the network; monitoring and, if necessary, sanctioning the governance process by representative authorities outside the network; accepting common norms on good governance by the other actors in the network; accountability of the other actors in the process, etc. (Aars & Fimreite, 2005; Hovik & Vabo, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

³¹ Originally, governance networks (and its literature) focused strongly on their capacity to improve efficiency and effectiveness on the output side of the system. However, the participative value and capacity of this regime has been brought stronger under the attention as an inherent condition and surplus (Sørensen & Torfing, 2003, 2005 and 2009; Wälti et al., 2004; Aars & Fimreite, 2005; Bogason & Musso, 2006; Nyholm & Haveri, 2009).

participatory and deliberative criticism on governance (Wälti et al., 2004; also Aars & Fimreite, 2005; Hansen, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). In fact, network decision-making tends to only incorporate actors who have a direct stake in the policy-making process (in contrast with the basic equality principle of the classic government model). There is no open competition for the inclusion in the networks either. In addition to this limitation on the input side, network governance could lack clear accountability on the throughput side of the system³².

A part of the solution to these problems is thus to link governance networks to the democratic institutions of traditional government, *in casu* the local councillors (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Wälti et al., 2004; Hansen, 2005; Hovik & Vabo, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005 and 2009; Nyholm & Haveri, 2009). Councillors can profit from their democratic legitimacy, formal authority and resources to this end (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). As such, they create *representative network governance* (Hansen, 2005) and evolve from sovereign rulers to modern *metagovernors* (Sørensen, 2006). Arguably, the introduction of metagovernance might slow down the process of decision-making in governance networks. Yet by balancing proactive leadership with democratic feedback and support, *metagovernance* is an important condition for its success (Steyvers, 2012).

The metagovernance-umbrella encompasses an extensive and diversified toolkit for the councillors. Sørensen and Torfing (2009: 248) discern four broad sets of instruments: network *design* (e.g. set the objectives and deadlines, ensure broad participation, install different networks, ensure publicity, terminate the network, etc.); network *framing* (e.g. shape the fiscal and legal context, set the goals and joint mission, promote coordination and interdependencies, monitor the performance, impose sanctions or adjustments, etc.), network *management* (e.g. provide resources, reduce tensions, promote equality, ensure transparency through communication, monitor the accountability of other actors, etc.) and network *participation* (e.g. facilitate cooperation, build trust, create democratic attitudes, learn from failure and institutionalize success, pursue a broad agenda, safeguard open and responsive deliberation, evaluate the performances, etc.). Clearly, with the cumulative use of these tools comes a stronger role in the governance network. This role differs in terms of distance to the network (i.e. standing outside the network versus being embedded in the network) and engagement in the network (i.e. hands-off versus hands-on

³² This criticism follows from a particular dilemma in governance networks (Sørensen & Torfing, 2003). Whereas the actors involved should enjoy a certain degree of freedom to reach spontaneous decisions, they also need to be kept in check by the organization or group they represent. Moreover, many actors in governance networks have not been popularly authorized beforehand and/or are not controlled afterwards (Papadopoulos, 2007).

approach) (Sörensen, 2006). Councillors may, consequently, act as *spectators*, *facilitators* (or *enablers*), *playmakers* or *arbitrators* in the network (Steyvers, 2012)³³.

Metagovernance thus entails a shift from councillors' traditional primacy to a new role in the initiation and guidance of network processes, which gradually seek to discover the common interest of the actors involved (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000). This might end up significantly improving the democratic quality of the political system on the macro-level. Sörensen (2006) explains why a political system based on metagovernance could be worth striving for. For her, such a system multiplies the channels of possible citizen input and simultaneously increases the possibility that citizens can influence policies that are of particular or direct interest to them. The variety of possible decision-making paths also enhances the plurality of citizen input and helps citizens to develop participatory skills. Taken together, this form of decision-making might bring citizens closer together and reduce the gap between citizens and politicians³⁴. When considering the irreversibility of local governance, the conclusion for Bogason and Musso (2006: 13) is clear: councillors should "*metagovern or perish*."

Metagovernance could give a new dimension to the councillor office in Belgium too. Citizen-legislators would no longer have to chase an unattainable ideal of the past. Instead, they can turn to a pragmatic, more realistic and versatile new function. Like modern soldiers, councillors can engage in particular networks and use different tools to play various roles depending on the circumstances, their capacities and interests. As such, the council and the councillors are no longer the engines that drive the political system, but are more the oil that runs it. Given the typical qualities of local politics, as well as its nature as a laboratory for reform (see Vetter & Kersting, 2003b; Pilet et al., 2005; De Rynck, 2007), local councillors might be the appropriate actors to try out and refine this new metagovernor role. The implementation of metagovernance in practice will, therefore, also be one of the major challenges for Belgian local governments in the future (Steyvers, 2012).

Still metagovernance alone might not provide the *ultimate* solution, and neglecting or dismissing the current attempts of institutional renovation could be to throw out the baby

³³ Other roles that are frequently associated with metagovernance are the *guardian* role (e.g. guarding the democratic proceedings of, or the common interest in, governance networks; see Hansen 2001 and 2005; Denters et al., 2008; Nyholm & Haveri, 2009) or the role as *spokesmen* of non-included citizens and their interests (Hansen, 2001 and 2005; Hovik and Vabo, 2005). Another way of organizing the metagovernor toolkit is to follow the policy process (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000: 384). Councillors' toolkit then consists of: initiating and legitimizing at the start, supporting and being actively involved during the process, and reconciling and selecting alternatives in the end.

³⁴ These benefits add to the classic output functionality of governance networks in solving complex contemporary problems in an effective and efficient way (Hovik & Vabo, 2005; Sörensen & Torfing, 2005 and 2009; Bogason & Musso, 2006; Papadopoulos, 2007).

with the bathwater. Indeed, it is likely that the old ways of decision-making will not disappear completely because some problems will keep requiring classic processes of decision-making (Jacobsen, 2009; Steyvers, 2012). Metagovernance could then represent an improvement to just a particular aspect of the political system. In the meantime, it seems therefore reasonable to assume that the system would still benefit from strong(er) councillors in the typical government setting too.

Furthermore, we can also raise some doubts about the feasibility and desirability of this third perspective. First, are the necessary conditions in place for councillors to assume the metagovernance attitude? Hitherto, the metagovernor role seems to have evolved rather organically, and particularly in the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon world. Nyholm and Haveri (2009) argue, however, that a solid institutionalized basis is necessary to make metagovernance effective. In Belgium, the current emphasis of central government (still) lies on the classic councillor roles³⁵. It is also unlikely that the *average* local councillor already understands his/her potential role as metagovernor, let alone that he or she would know how to use its specific tool kit. And metagovernance could be too abstract and elusive to enthuse (potential) councillors. With regard to this remark, our results indicate that councillors are not willing to give up their traditional political primacy and classic role-set yet – even if they admit that modern decision-making should evolve in interaction with the relevant stakeholders in society³⁶. Authors generally recognize that councillors' perception of their own role could be an obstacle for effective metagovernance (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Sörensen, 2006; Dezeure & De Rynck, 2010). Besides, insofar as councillors understand their new role and they are willing to adopt it, they still have to possess the necessary capacities to do so (Nyholm & Haveri, 2009; Dezeure & De Rynck, 2010)³⁷. Metagovernance not only requires a change of mind, but also many strategic capacities such as negotiating, managing, alliance-seeking, planning, etc. These traits might be quite remote from the typical image of the layman citizen-legislator, and consequently, call for a new type of politician.

Second, what are the chances that councillors (will) adapt their behaviour to the new metagovernance standards? The scientific evidence at hand suggests that this could be easier said than done in the Belgian setting. Verhoest and De Meu (2008), for instance, have underscored the limited involvement of the council in the policies of inter-municipal co-operations. In less formal, ad hoc policy networks (*in casu* spatial planning and city

³⁵ Even though there is a legal basis for councillors to engage in governance networks too (e.g. citizen participation devices, representation in formal governance networks, the mandatory discussion of formal network policies in a council committee, etc.).

³⁶ In our dataset, 64% of the respondents (strongly) agree with the statement that “*political decisions should not only be taken by representative bodies but be negotiated together with the concerned local actors*” (Q19).

³⁷ As Nyholm and Haveri (2009) indicate, it is for instance a fine line between directing and dominating decision-making processes.

development), similar conclusions have emerged (De Rynck & Voets, 2006; Block & Steyvers, 2011). And at the other end of the network spectrum, Dezeure and De Rynck (2010) have found that councillors seldom use the available tools to engage in different forms of citizen participation too. The latter could nevertheless form an interesting complement to councillors' classic input function and a realistic alternative to make a meaningful contribution to the local system (Denters et al., 2008).

A final objection that we could raise relates to the question: 'Will metagovernance eventually change the system *for the better*?' Despite its obvious democratic (and functional) potential, the answer is not a straightforward *yes*. Sörensen (2006) also lists some possible caveats of network governance: it reduces the ability of politicians to control the process of decision making, as well as the level of publicity on the process. Besides, the communality within the network could also lead the network to separate or alienate from the community at large (Sörensen, 2006). This is why governments will have to face the challenge of balancing tailored policies with the municipalities' general goals and integral policies (Steyvers, 2012). Ad hoc networks might produce effective and democratic results for the particular group of stakeholders involved, yet it is the task of the councillors to pursue policies that serve the community as a whole. A final caveat is that governance opens up new ways of influencing the policy-making process which are particularly suited to those actors that already possessed many participatory skills beforehand (Sörensen, 2006). For the councillors, this *Matteüs-effect* would probably mean that metagovernance is mainly suited to the likes of the executives (Tops & Zouridis, 2002; Nyholm & Haveri, 2009). Meanwhile, the administrative leaders could consolidate their position in the networks as skilled professionals as well (Sörensen, 2006).

In Belgium, the aforementioned research confirms that these groups are the traditional spiders in the functional network web (De Rynck & Voets, 2006; Block & Steyvers, 2011). The ordinary councillor is often just a spectator, or a facilitator at best. Furthermore, also the main reasons for councillors' absence in networks of citizen participation sound familiar: a lack of awareness of the (legal) possibilities, the supremacy of the executive board and party discipline (Dezeure & De Rynck, 2010). The success of the role as metagovernor thus seems liable to the same mechanisms as the success of its classic counterpart. Consequently, without accompanying formal rules, we may doubt that metagovernance will produce a more efficient, transparent *and* democratic political system in the end. And if metagovernance would fail, there should be something to fall back on, or make the proper corrections. This is why none of the three broad perspectives that we have discussed in this section can be regarded as the holy grail of local politics. No single perspective is likely to yield the ultimate solution. However, each in their own capacity, the perspectives hold at least some potential to re-

empower the councillors, and contribute to an efficient, transparent and democratic political system at the local level.

7.4. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To conclude our study, we devote this final section to the interpretation of our results in light of the scientific state of the art. Our aim has been to offer an empirical understanding of the contemporary role and position of the local councillors in Belgium. We thereby sought to bring some structure to an academic wasteland. On the basis of a standardized cross-sectional and actor-centred analysis, we have interpreted councillors' auto-evaluations to develop an answer on our fundamental research question. In so doing, our analysis is the first to have systematically analyzed a large group of local councillors across the whole country on such a wide variety of themes. Furthermore, the comparative complement has placed these insights in a broader, international perspective. However, we also realize that our study could only focus on some aspects of a complex reality. Indeed, it had to take practical and theoretical limitations into consideration along the way. Therefore, our empirical generalization is not an end point, but, hopefully, a benchmark and trigger for new empirical research cycles. Below, we single out some possible and/or recommended lines of research to this end.

The first suggestions relate to the practical limitations of our research method. The quantitative technique has allowed us to sketch a general picture with different underlying patterns. Yet our results are obviously not a template that fits every councillor, every municipality, or every situation. To capture the complex reality in a particular place-bound, well-defined context, qualitative research techniques could prove to be better instruments³⁸. In-depth interviews with different actors (councillors, but also administrators, citizens, other stakeholders, etc.), focus groups and participant observations could then apply and refine the existent knowledge to the situation in place. Many authors feel that the methodological triangulation of quantitative and qualitative insights could indeed be a fruitful research approach (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996; Burnham et al., 2008; Hopkin, 2010). And in addition to such contextual diversifications, these instruments might also be more appropriate to analyzing the role and position of the councillors in less formally institutionalized settings such as governance networks. Another suggestion would be to extend the scope of analysis from the individual micro-level to more aggregate counterparts. This could imply assessing the impact and functioning of the councils and/or committees and party groups as collective

³⁸ As De Rynck (2000) argues, the power relations in every municipality are dependent upon the interplay between different actors (councillors, executives, administrators, political parties, citizens en civil actors), and are subject to constant change.

institutions (on the meso-level), or even looking into the macro-context of the political system as such. In the latter approach, councillors are studied as part of a more comprehensive setting, including citizens, networks, the administration, policy outputs, etc. Finally, a longitudinal perspective seems indispensable to interpret the value of our thematic conclusions more profoundly. In terms of recruitment and career development (the professionalization and/or democratization trend), as well as role and position (an noting improvement or degradation in both), the interpretation of the mandate (the entrepreneurial shift), and the internal trend in the country (divergence, convergence or path-dependency), we have found that follow-up research is required to fully grasp the meaning of the results.

The other suggestions follow from the theoretical research approach that we have followed. In the introductory chapter, we have indicated how our research fits in the scientific tradition that holds the middle between problem-driven and theory-driven research (Baldersheim & Wollmann, 2006). The aim was thus neither to test the impact of institutional reforms (for such an example, see e.g. Pilet et al., 2007b; Olislagers et al., 2008 and 2009; De Groot, 2009; Olislagers & Ackaert, 2010; Matagne et al., 2011) nor to construct general theories on the role and position of local councillors. Rather, we have aimed to test theories on our research data to gain an understanding of a practical problem in Belgian local democracy. Future research might, therefore, complement our insights by tending (more) to one of the ends of this continuum. For instance, problem-driven research can further evaluate the effects of existing and the new institutional reforms in the Belgian setting. It could also compare the Belgian reforms and their outcomes to reforms in other countries. Detailed and solid explorations of the basis for the alternative scenarios and councillor roles could be a valuable part of this line of inquiry too.

Lastly, in the other direction of the continuum our thematic analyses may be further elaborated in depth, generalized, and/or complemented with new aspects to enhance theoretical rigour. Often, these research lines require more sophisticated analytical techniques and/or qualitative complements. Regarding the recruitment and career theme, path models could provide more insight in the mechanisms as such. Supplementary analysis might tackle the perspective of the voters and the selectorates as blind spots in our research. A systematic analysis of the impact of recruitment and career upon the actual behaviour in office would be another further step to take. Second, the analysis of councillors' role-sets could profit from the connection between the classic orthodoxy and the new discourse about the roles of the councillors as metagovernors. Another aspect that deserves more attention concerning this theme is the relation between the councillors and the local administration. Indeed, councillors' functioning not only depends upon the openness of the BMA and the party groups. The growing impact of the professional

municipal administration in the present exigent governance context is similarly an important element of the story³⁹. Third, councillors' notion of political representation could be compared to the other political levels and the notions of the citizens at the other end of the representative chain. This could tell us more about the nature of local politics and the congruence between the political system and the community it is to serve. It would also be interesting to systematically analyze councillors' notion on the different other elements of the contemporary pluralistic political system. Finally, the comparative analysis could be replicated in a broader setting, including different countries as well as councillors from the smaller municipalities. And regarding the internal state of Belgian local government, our hypotheses could be tested in different contexts, focussing on different actors and/or more aspects of the political system.

³⁹ Regarding this subject, Pruim (2010) aptly states how the elections are often perceived as annoying interruptions in the municipal management process by the administrators.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A. ORIGINAL QUESTIONNAIRE

A Questions about the council and actors in the local democracy

1. Which influence has the Council in your municipality concerning the following tasks?		Very high influ- ence	High influence	Some in- fluence	Little influence	No in- fluence	Not an activity for the muni- cipality
1	Defining administrative procedures	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
2	Financial programming/evaluation	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
3	Urban planning	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
4	Industrial and economic development	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
5	Environment protection	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
6	Strategic planning	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
7	Relations with other local authorities	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
8	Organisation of collective services	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
9	Appoint local chief executives	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>

2. Who is in your municipality mainly serving the following functions - the committees or the council?

		Only the commit -tees	Mostly the commit -tees	Both, to equal extent	Mostly the council	Only the council	Neither of them
10	To represent the interests of local people	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
11	To enable the participation of people other than politicians in deliberations	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
12	To allow in-depth discussion of particular issues	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
13	To represent the interests of parties	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
14	To oversee the work of a department	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
15	To make strategic policy decisions	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
16	To make day-to-day management decisions	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
17	To allow politicians to develop specialisms	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
18	To propose or develop new policies	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>

3. Please indicate the political balance of your council:

- 19
- 20 1☐ A single party with an overall majority *Please state which party:*
- 21 2☐ A single party without an overall majority *Please state which party:*
- 22 3☐ A coalition *Please describe:*
- 23 4☐ Other *Please describe:*

4. If your municipality is governed by a coalition, how would you characterise the agreement?

- 24 There is a distribution of posts 1☐ **Yes** 0☐ **No**
- 25 There is an agreement on policies 1☐ **Yes** 0☐ **No**

5. On the basis of your experience as a local councillor in this City, and independently of the formal procedures, please indicate how influential each of the following actors are over the Local Authority activities.

	Very high in- fluence	High influence	Some in- fluence	Little influence	No in- fluence	Not relevant
26 The Mayor	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
27 The President of the Council	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
28 The Presidents of Council Committees	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
29 The Executive board	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
30 Single councillors	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
31 Myself	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
32 The Heads of Departments in the Municipality	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
33 The Municipal Chief Executive Officer	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
34 Professional Consultants/Experts	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
35 Local MPs or Ministers	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
36 Local trade unions	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
37 Journalists	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
38 Local businessmen	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
39 National and international firms	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
40 The Church	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
41 Local (voluntary) associations	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
42 Local single issue groups	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
43 Quarter decentralised institutional bodies	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
44 Party leaders	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
45 The party groups in the council	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
46 Party organisations	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
47 Region and upper levels of government	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>

6. If a firm wants to enforce a project in the locality and expects that the council will not approve of the project, what actors would it have to win over to its side in order to influence the council?

	Yes	No
48 The leaders of the party groups in the council	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
49 The leader of one or more committees	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
50 The Mayor	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
51 The Members of the executive body	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
52 The Heads of Departments in the Municipality	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
53 Professional Consultants/ Experts	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
54 Local businessmen, shop-owners, etc.	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
55 Local Chambers of commerce	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
56 Local MPs or Ministers	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
57 Local trade unions	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
58 Journalists	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
59 The Church	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
60 Local (voluntary) associations	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
61 Local single issue groups	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
62 Region/Upper levels of Government	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
63 Other	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

B Questions about your role as councillor

7. For how many years have you been a councillor in total?

64 For years

8. Were you elected as a candidate

- 65 1 ☐ of a list of a national party. *Please state which party:* 66
- 2 ☐ of a local list
- 3 ☐ as an individual or independent candidate

9. How did you become a candidate the first time you were nominated?

- 67 1 ☐ I proposed myself
- 2 ☐ I was asked by others

10. In your experience as a councillor, <u>how important</u> are the following tasks for you as a councillor:		Very great	Great	Moderate	Little	None
68	Defining the main goals of the municipal activity	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
69	Controlling the municipal activity	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
70	Representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
71	Publicising the debate on local issues before decisions are taken	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
72	Explaining decisions of the council to the citizens	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
73	Implementing the program of my political party/movement	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
74	Reinforcing the executive	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
75	In mediating conflicts in the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
76	Promoting the views and interests of minorities in the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
77	Promoting the views and interests of women in the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

11. Do you get a satisfying amount of information from the municipal administration to perform your job as a councillor?					
	Fully satisfying	Satisfying	Neither satisfying nor unsatisfying	Mainly unsatisfying	Fully unsatisfying
78	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>

12. Do you receive an allowance as a councillor?	
79	Yes 1 <input type="checkbox"/> No 0 <input type="checkbox"/>

13. Considering the corresponding responsibilities, do you think your allowance as a councillor is adequate or not?	
80	Not Adequate 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate

14. How much time do you spend on the following activities?

		Average number of hours per month
81	Council and committee meetings	.....
82	Meetings with the party's council group	.....
83	Other party meetings and activities	.....
84	Public debates, meetings with citizens, etc.	.....
85	Meetings with administrative staff	.....
86	Field visits to municipal institutions	.....
87	Desk work preparing your activity in the Council	.....
88	Other important activity as councillor,	.....
89	- please specify.....	

15. How frequently do you have contact with the following individuals or groups?

		A few times a week	A few times a month	A few times a year	(Almost) never
90	The mayor	3□	2□	1□	0□
91	Members of the executive board	3□	2□	1□	0□
92	Committee Leaders	3□	2□	1□	0□
93	The President of the council	3□	2□	1□	0□
94	Members of my party group	3□	2□	1□	0□
95	Members of other party groups	3□	2□	1□	0□
96	The leaders of my own local party organisation	3□	2□	1□	0□
97	The Municipality Chief Executive Officer	3□	2□	1□	0□
98	Civil servants in the municipality	3□	2□	1□	0□
99	Union representatives	3□	2□	1□	0□
100	Leading actors from voluntary associations	3□	2□	1□	0□
101	Women organisations	3□	2□	1□	0□
102	Organisations of ethnic minorities	3□	2□	1□	0□
103	Representatives of upper levels of government	3□	2□	1□	0□

104	Representatives of public agencies at the local level	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
105	Private business representatives	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
106	Journalists	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
107	Individual citizens in your role as a councillor	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

16. How important is it for you as a local councillor to represent the following groups or interests?

		Of utmost import- ance	Of great import- ance	Of moderate import- ance	Of little import- ance	Not important at all
108	The whole locality	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
109	Ethnic minority(ies)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
110	Women	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
111	Workers	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
112	The middle class	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
113	Local business groups	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
114	Farmers	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
115	Religious group/the Church	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
116	Some particular local government service	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
117	Less resourceful citizens	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
118	A particular geographic part of the locality	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

17. If there should be a conflict between a member's own opinion, the opinion of the party group in the council or the opinion of the voters, how should, in your opinion, a member of the council vote?

- 1☐ Vote according to his/her own conviction
- 119 2☐ Vote according to the opinion of the party group
- 3☐ Vote according to the opinion of the voters

C Questions about your view on local democracy and local policy

18. How important are in your opinion the following goals for your local authority		Of ut- most import- ance	Of great import- ance	Of mod- erate import- ance	Of little import- ance	Not import- ant at all
120	To attract economic activities in the city	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
121	To develop highly qualified activities	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
122	To regenerate or rebuild the city-centre	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
123	To improve infrastructures and services for mobility	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
124	To improve the aesthetics of the city	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
125	To develop leisure services and cultural offer	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
126	To develop housing offer	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
127	To defend the traditional cohesion of the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
128	To emphasise diversity and tolerance in the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
129	To improve the level of services and well-being in the city	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
130	To reduce pollution	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
131	To improve the external image of the city	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
132	To attract new population	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
133	To attract a wealthier population	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
134	To improve the position of women in the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
135	To fight against marginality and poverty	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
136	Other	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
137	- please specify.....					

19. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

		Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Dis- agree	Strongly disagree
138	Political parties are the most suitable arena for citizen participation	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
139	An important task of a councillor is to defend the interests of under-represented groups	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
140	Local referenda lead to high quality of public debate	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
141	Competition between service providers facilitates citizen choice in public services	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
142	Decentralisation of local government is necessary to involve citizens in public affairs	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
143	Public-private partnerships are more effective in solving problems than public administration and representative bodies	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
144	Political decisions should not only be taken by representative bodies but be negotiated together with the concerned local actors	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
145	Female representatives can better than men look out for women's interests	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
146	Local bureaucrats should as far as possible stick to politically defined goals.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
147	Women councillors often cooperate in the council, irrespective of party membership	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
148	The integrity of the leading councillors is high and it is not possible to get a favourable decision by offering benefits to the councillors.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
149	Politicians should only define objectives and control outputs, and never intervene into the task fulfilment of local administration.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
150	The need for changes and reorganisation of the local government sector has been greatly exaggerated.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
151	There are few benefits from contracting out or privatising services in the municipality	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
152	Male and female councillors put forward different questions in local politics	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

20. There is often talk about a left-right dimension in [Belgian] politics. Where would you place yourself on a left-right dimension?											
	Left										Right
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
153	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

21. People have different ideas about how local democracy should function. Please indicate how important for local democracy you feel the following requirements are:						
		Of utmost importance	Of great importance	Of moderate importance	Of little importance	Not important at all
154	Residents should participate actively and directly in making important local decisions.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
155	Residents should have the opportunity to make their views known before important local decisions are made by elected representatives.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
156	Apart from voting, citizens should not be given the opportunity to influence local government policies	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
157	Council decisions should reflect a majority opinion among the residents.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
158	Political representatives should make what they think are the right decisions, independent of the current views of local people.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
159	Local politicians should try to generate consensus and shared values among local citizens/groups.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
160	The results of local elections should be the most important factor in determining municipal policies	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

22. How effective are the following instruments in letting local politicians know public opinion irrespective of whether such reforms have been introduced in your own country or municipality?						
		Very effective	Effective	Moderately effective	Not sufficiently effective	Not effective
161	Voting	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
162	Party meetings	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
163	Petitions	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
164	Citizens juries	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

165	Public meetings	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
166	Satisfaction surveys	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
167	Complaints schemes	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
168	Referenda	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
169	Consultation with local agencies	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
170	Consultation with community groups	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

23. How effective do you consider the use made by the council and the councillors of the instruments available to them?

		Very effective	Effective	Moderately effective	Not sufficiently effective	Not effective
171	Questions	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
172	Interpellation	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
173	Motion (Declaration of agreement with decision of Municipality)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
174	Resolution	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
175	Agenda	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
176	Inquiry right	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
177	Information right	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
178	Scrutiny	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
179	Local referenda	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

24. In your experience as a councillor, how would you define your contribution regarding the following tasks?

		Very great	Great	Moderate	Little	None
180	Defining the main goals of the municipal activity	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
181	Controlling the municipal activity	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
182	Representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
183	Publicising the debate on local issues before decisions are taken	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

184	Explaining decisions of the council to the citizens	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
185	Implementing the program of my political party/ movement	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
186	Reinforcing the executive	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
187	In mediating conflicts in the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
188	Promoting the views and interests of minorities in the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
189	Promoting the views and interests of women in the local society	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

25. Below you find a number of reforms that have been introduced in municipalities in different European countries. Irrespective of whether such reforms have been introduced in your own country or municipality how desirable or undesirable do you consider the following reforms:

		Highly desirable	Desirable	Neither desirable nor undesirable	Un- desirable	Highly undesirable
190	An advisory (non-binding) referendum	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
191	A decisive (binding) referendum	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
192	Frequent surveys to monitor local public opinion	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
193	Direct elections of mayors	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
194	Co-decision procedures, where –citizens can discuss and make binding decisions on certain local issues.	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
195	Devolution of responsibilities to neighbourhood organizations	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
196	Citizen consultation procedure, where citizens are informed about and can support or criticize municipal proposals	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
197	Transferring the powers of scrutiny over municipal services to user boards	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
198	Reducing the number of members of the Council	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

D Questions concerning your political career and your party

26. Do you presently hold any of the following elective or executive offices? Have you previously held any of these offices?

		Yes, today	Not now, but before	No, Never
199	Member of Parliament	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
200	Minister	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
201	Councillor in another municipality	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
202	Mayor in another municipality	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
203	Member of regional (or provincial) executive board	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
204	Parish council	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
205	Member of board of council-owned joint stock company or foundation	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
206	Member of a council committee	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
207	President of a council committee	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
208	Member of the executive board	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
209	President of the council	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
210	Delegate of the mayor	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
211	Regional councillor	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
212	Provincial councillor	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
213	Member of a co-operative body of Local Authorities	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

27. Are you, or have you previously been, a member or holding a position in the following types of organisations?

			At present		Not now, but before		Never been a member
			Elected or appointed position	Only member	Elected or appointed position	Only member	
214	215	Trade union	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
216	217	Business/professional association	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
218	219	Humanitarian organisation	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
220	221	Sport/athletic organisation	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
222	223	Women organisation	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

224	225	Environmental organisation	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
226	227	Ethnic minority organisation	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
228	229	Religious organisation	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
230	231	Neighbourhood organisation	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
232	233	Other organisation	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
		– please specify:					
234		.....				

28. Are you presently a party member?

235 0 ☐ No 1 ☐ Yes, Please specify which party: 236

29. When did you first become a party member:

237 Year:..... Please specify which party 238

0 ☐ I have never belonged to any party

30. Do you presently have, or have you previously had, a position (board member etc.) in your party's organisation (beside the party's council group)?

		Yes, presently	Yes, previously	No, never	Not applicable. My party does not have such an organisation or I'm not a member of a party
239	In the local party organisation	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
240	Upper level party organisations	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

31. What is your opinion on the following statements about your party?

		Agree totally	Partly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partly dis- agree	Disagree totally	Not applicable
241	The local party organisation has much influence over the decisions of the party's council group	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
242	The party's council group has much influence over the decisions of the local party	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>

243	The leader of the party group usually informs and seeks the support of the party group when decisions are taken	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>
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32. Have you got a seat in the council due to the preferential voting system, i.e. although you have not been placed in higher positions of your party or local list?

244 1 ☐ Yes 0 ☐ No

33. As a candidate in the last election, to what extent did you have the support of the following groups:

		Very great	Great	Some	Little	Not at all
245	National organ(s) of your party	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
246	Your party wing/fraction	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
247	Your party at the local level	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
248	National politician(s)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
249	Local prestigious person(s)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
250	Trade union(s)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
251	Local business group(s)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
252	Women organisation(s)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
253	Local media	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
254	The church	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
255	Local (voluntary) association(s)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
256	Ethnic group(s)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

34. When you first accepted to become a candidate, how important were the following reasons?

Please indicate the importance of each motive.

		Of utmost importance	Of great importance	Of moderate importance	Of little importance	Not important at all
257	General interest in politics	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
258	Possibility to highlight the needs of the group I represent	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
259	It is a chance to learn how the political system functions	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
260	As a councillor I can do a good job	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

	for the party I represent					
261	It is an opportunity to control the administration	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
262	The allowances tempted me to become a councillor	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
263	As a councillor I have the opportunity to make social contacts	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
264	As a councillor I will be held in high esteem	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
265	It is an opportunity to enter into a political career	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
266	As a councillor I have the opportunity to influence specific issues	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
267	It is a citizen duty to engage oneself in municipal affairs	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
268	Other reasons (specify)	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
269	.....				

35. For the time being, what are you planning to do at the end of the present mandate?

Please select one of the following alternatives

- 270 1 ☐ I would like to continue as a councillor
- 2 ☐ I would like to continue my political career in a higher political office at the local level
- 3 ☐ I would like to continue my political career in a higher political office at the regional or national level
- 4 ☐ I would like to quit politics

36. If you want to quit politics, could you please state why?

		Yes	No
271	I want to concentrate on my profession	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
272	I want to work for a voluntary organisation	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
273	I have done my citizen duty	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
274	I think political work is too time-consuming in relation to family or occupation	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
275	I lack influence (of myself, my party or municipalities in general)	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

276	I am too old	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
277	I will move from the municipality	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

E Questions about your background

37.	
278	How old are you? .....years

38.	
279	Are you male or female? 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Male 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Female

39.	For how many years have you lived in your municipality?
280	.....years

40.	What is your highest completed education?
281	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Elementary school
	2 <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary school or equivalent
	3 <input type="checkbox"/> University / college or equivalent.

41.	In the two last generations, were any of your close relatives elected for a political function?
282	1 <input type="checkbox"/> Yes 0 <input type="checkbox"/> No

42. To which occupational category did you belong before your first mandate as a councillor? And to which occupational category do you belong today?		
283		
284	Before	Now
Professional politician (or the like, e.g. cabinet or party function)	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>
Civil servant	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>
Business manager	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>
Teacher	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>
Liberal profession (e.g. lawyer, doctor)	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
Engineer (or the like, e.g. computer specialist, technician)	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
Clerk	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>
Shopkeeper (or the like, e.g. salesman)	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>
Labourer	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>
Farmer or fisher	10 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>
Student	11 <input type="checkbox"/>	11 <input type="checkbox"/>
Retired	12 <input type="checkbox"/>	12 <input type="checkbox"/>
Housewife/-man	13 <input type="checkbox"/>	13 <input type="checkbox"/>
Other, please specify.....	14 <input type="checkbox"/>	14 <input type="checkbox"/>

43. In your present occupation are you			
285			
	1 <input type="checkbox"/> An employee	2 <input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed	3 <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed/student/retired

44. If you are an employee – Are you employed by a public sector organisation or by a private firm?				
	Public sector	Private firm/Voluntary organisation	Employed in both public and private sector	Neither/Not employed
286	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

45. How much time do you spend on the following activities per week?

- 287 Gainful employmenthours/week
- 288 Unpaid care and household workhours/week

46. Where were you and your parents born?

- | | [Belgium] | Another country | Specify which country: |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| 289 I was born in: | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 290..... |
| 291 My mother was born in: | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 292..... |
| 293 My father was born in: | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 294..... |

47. To what extent do you feel that you belong to the following groups in society?

- | | To a high degree | To some degree | Neither high nor low degree | To a low degree | Not at all |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 295 The working classes | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 0 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 296 The middle classes | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 0 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 297 The upper classes | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 0 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 298 The [Belgian] people | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 0 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 299 A religious group | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 0 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 300 An ethnic minority group | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 0 <input type="checkbox"/> |

48. How many persons live in your household?

- 301persons older than 12 years and under-aged children (under the age of 12)
- 302

49. Do you have any help with handling the household /care work, except from your husband/wife/partner?

	Yes	No
303 Relatives (for ex grandparents)	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
304 Nanny/au pair or equivalent	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>
305 Service Company	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	0 <input type="checkbox"/>

50. Do you, apart from your own children, have any care responsibilities for other persons due to illness, age, handicap or else?

306 1 ☐ Yes 0 ☐ No

51. Thank you for taking time to answer the questionnaire. If you have any more comments about the questionnaire or the issues raised in it, please feel free to write them down:

307

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

APPENDIX B. THE 180 MUNICIPALITIES OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

Aalter, Amay, Andenne, Anderlues, Ans, Antwerpen, Anzegem, Asse, Assenede, Assesse;

Balen, Beauvechain, Beernem, Beersel, Beringen, Berlaar, Bever, Binche, Bièvre, Bilzen, Blankenberge, Blégny, Bonheiden, Boortmeerbeek, Bornem, Bouillon, Boutersem, Braives, Brunehaut;

Chapelle-lez-Herlaimont, Chastre, Châtelet, Chimay, Comblain-au-Pont;

Damme, Deerlijk, Dentergem, De Pinte, Dessel, Diepenbeek, Dinant, Diksmuide, Donceel;

Ecaussinnes, Ellezelles, Enghien, Esneux, Etterbeek, Estaimpuis;

Faimes, Ferrières, Fexhe-le-Haut-Clocher, Florenville, Fontaine-l'Évêque, Fosses-la-Ville;

Gedinne, Genk, Gent, Gingelom, Gooik;

Haaltert, Halle, Ham, Harelbeke, Havelange, Hemiksem, Herbeumont, Herentals, Herstal, Hoegaarden, Hoogstraten, Huy;

Ichtegem;

Kapellen, Kapelle-op-den-Bos, Keerbergen, Kinrooi, Koekelare, Koekelberg, Komen-Waasten;

Laakdal, La Bruyère, La Louvière, La Roche en-Ardenne, Lebbeke, Léglise, Lens, Le Roeulx, Lichtervelde, Lier, Limbourg, Lint, Lochristi, Lokeren;

Machelen, Maldegem, Manage, Manhay, Mechelen, Meise, Meix-devant-Virton, Melle, Merksplas, Messancy, Mettet, Middelkerke, Moerbeke, Musson;

Namur, Nassogne, Nevele, Nieuwerkerken, Nivelles;

Opglabbeek, Oreye, Oudergem, Overijse, Overpelt;

Paliseul, Pepingen, Péruwelz, Pittem, Plombières, Putte, Puurs;

Ramillies, Ranst, Rendeux, Retie, Rijkevorsel, Rochefort, Roeselare, Ronse, Roosdaal, Rouvroy, Ruiselede, Rumes;

Saint-Georges-sur-Meuse, Schaarbeek, Scherpenheuvel, Schilde, Schoten, Seraing, Silly, Sint-Gillis-Waas, Sint-Joost-ten-Noode, Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe, Sint-Martens-Latem, Soumagne, Spiere-Helkijn, Sprimont, Staden, Stoumont;

Tervuren, Theux, Thimister-Clermont, Tielt;

Villers-la-Ville, Villers-le-Bouillet, Vorselaar, Vosselaar;

Waarschoot, Wanze, Waremmes, Wasseiges, Wavre, Wellen, Welkenraedt, Wemmel, Wetteren, Wichelen, Wuustwezel;

Yvoir;

Zandhoven, Zelzate, Zomergem, Zottegem, Zutendaal, Zwalm, Zwevegem.

APPENDIX C. POLITICAL RECRUITMENT AND POLITICAL CAREER (CHAPTER 3)

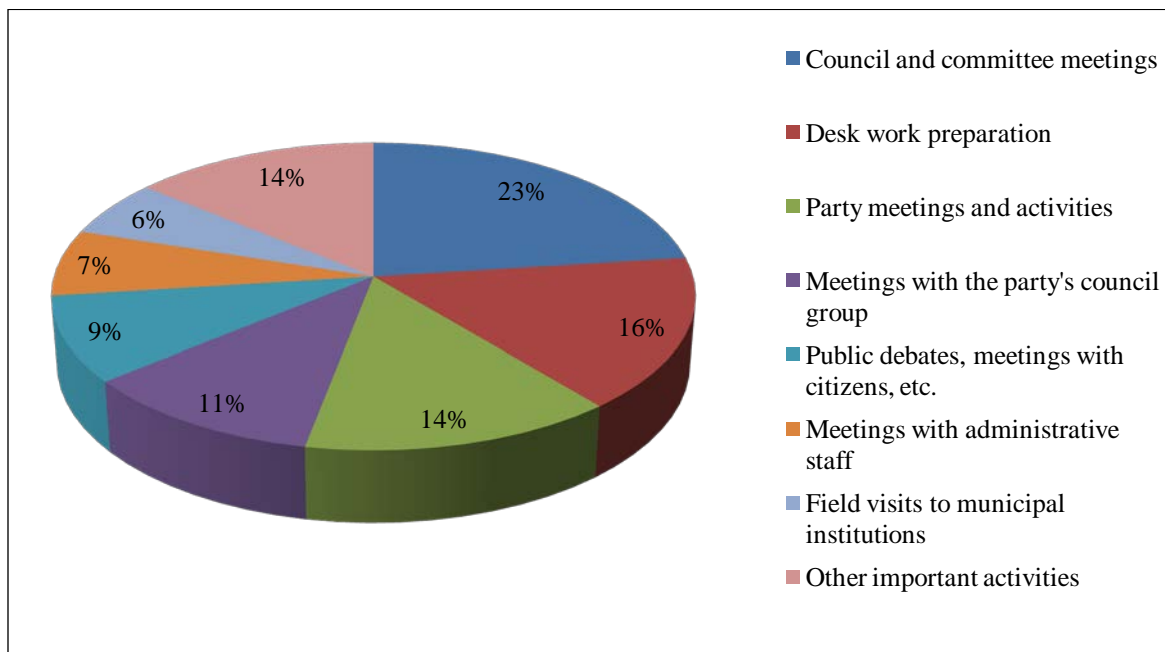
Analysis of the time spent on the different aspects of the councillor office

As a supplement to the analysis of their political career in *Chapter 3*, Figure 3.2 below specifies the time that Belgian local councillors spend on different activities of their office. The analysis is based on the following question:

- “How much time do you spend on the following activities? (in average numbers of hours per month): council and committee meetings; meetings with the party’s council group; other party meetings and activities; public debates, meetings with citizens, etc.; meetings with administrative staff; field visits to municipal institutions; desk work preparing your activity in the council; other important activity as a councillor” (Q14).

The figure presents the proportion of each activity, expressed in percentages.

Figure 3.2. Time spent on the activities of the local councillor office in Belgium



(N=799, 806, 804, 805, 811, 808, 802 – numbers presented in the original order of the items)

On an average total of 41.1 hours per month, councillors spend most time on council and committee meetings (23%). Desk working preparing those meetings is also an important activity (16%). Third, councillors spend a large part of their mandate on the political party, be it the party in general (14%) or the party group in particular (11%). On average, public debates and meetings with citizens only account for 9% of the formal councillor activities. Two other activities that do not seem very important for the average councillor are meetings with the administrative staff (7%) and field visits to the municipal institutions or agencies (6%).

Finally, councillors spend much time (14%) on other activities of the office – in their capacity as a councillor. Nearly half of the research population (N=385) has further specified these *other* activities. We can broadly classify them in four groups:

- *Representational activities (N=238):*
This is the group of activities which seem to be most important. Councillors have listed a large number of possible representational activities: attending all sorts of festivities and inaugurations (i.e. what De Winter and Dumont (2006: 968) call the “*flower pot*” function of the politicians), house visits, citizen contacts, attending activities of local associations, holding office hours, acts of service, political favouring, etc.
- *Activities in governance networks (i.e. the municipal satellites) (N=70):*
A second group of supplementary activities relate to councillors’ mandates in all kinds of formal governance networks (e.g. advisory councils, police councils, inter-municipal co-operations, municipal agencies, etc.).
- *Political activities in local government (N=26):*
In the third group, we find councillors who have listed their supplementary political activities in local government (i.e. being a mayor, alderman, council or committee president).
- *Various activities (N=74):*
The final group of supplementary activities as a councillor is quite diverse: study and training (plus examinations, lectures, information sessions, etc.), monitoring policy dossiers, organizing the municipal services, communication (press contacts, websites, public relations, party communication, etc.), and ... completing questionnaires.

APPENDIX D. ROLE ORIENTATION (CHAPTER 4)

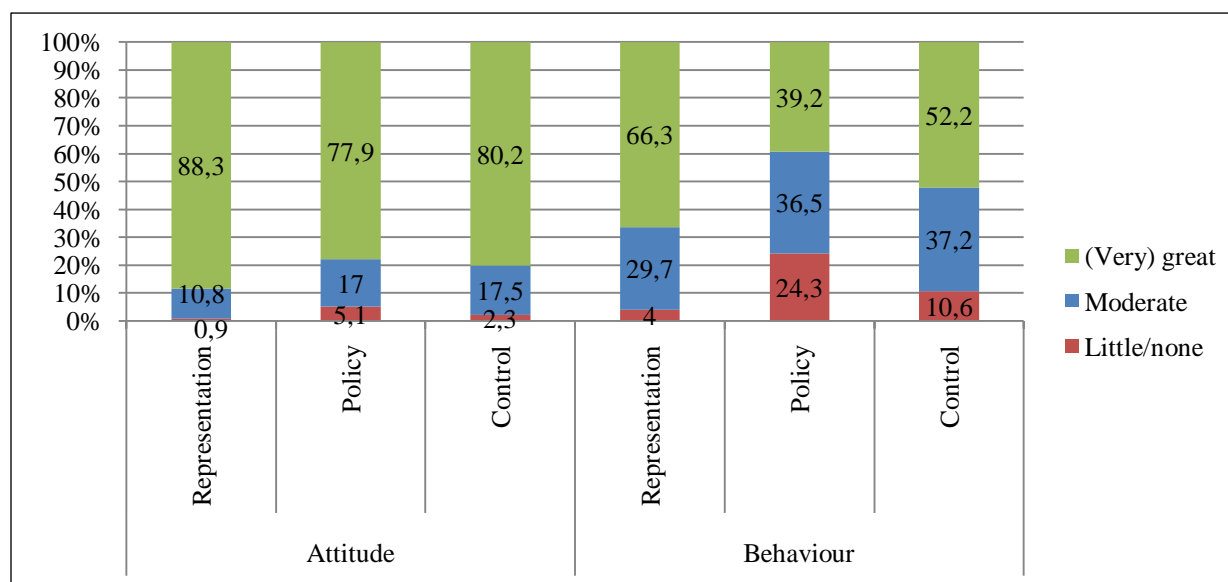
(A) Councillors' role discrepancy: attitude versus behaviour

The first annex to *Chapter 4* represents a graphic overview of the role attitude and role behaviour of the Belgian local councillors. These variables were measured by the following questions:

- “In your experience as a councillor, how important are the following tasks for you as a councillor? Representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society; Defining the main goals of the municipal activity; Controlling the municipal activity” (Q10).
- “In your experience as a councillor, how would you define your contribution regarding the following tasks? Representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society; Defining the main goals of the municipal activity; Controlling the municipal activity” (Q24).

Per role, the graph presents the percentages of respondents who gave a score ‘0’ or ‘1’ (i.e. little or no importance/contribution), ‘2’ (i.e. moderate importance/contribution) and ‘3’ or ‘4’ (i.e. great or very great importance/contribution) to the roles on a 0-4 scale.

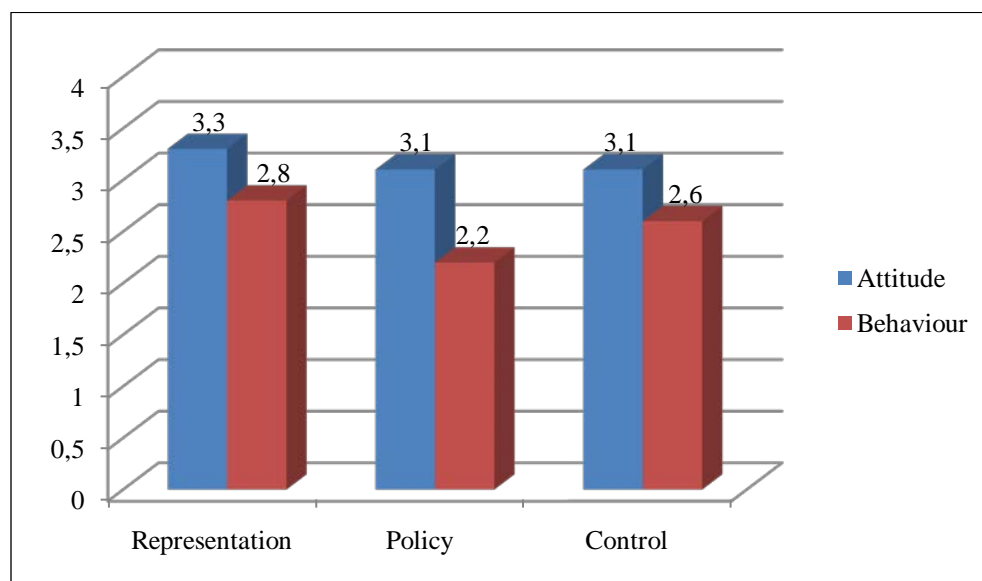
Figure 4.1. Role attitude and role behaviour of local councillors in Belgium



(Representation: N=844, 842; Policy: N=836, 841; Control: N=839, 846)

The second graph of this appendix (Figure 4.2) further underlines the role discrepancy between councillors' attitudes and self-reported behaviour in terms of representation, policy and control. The graph presents the mean scores for role attitude and role behaviour on a 0-4 scale per role.

Figure 4.2. Role discrepancy of local councillors in Belgium



(Representation: N=844, 842; Policy: N=836, 841; Control: N=839, 846)

(B) The supremacy of the political majority and the executive function

The second supplementary analysis to *Chapter 4* seeks to underscore the stringent dominance of the *informal rules of the game* in the Belgian local system. We analyze the supremacy of the councillors from the political majority and the councillors with experience in executive office in 5 tables (Table 4.4 to Table 4.8).

Table 4.4 and Table 4.5 assess councillors' evaluation of their instruments in office according to their function (i.e. experience in the BMA or not) and their position (i.e. being member of the political majority or the opposition). The analysis is based on the following question (with response categories being contextualized):

- “How effective do you consider the use made by the council and the councillors of the instruments available to them? *Interpellation; Voting; Set the council agenda and convene the council; Inquiry of the BMA; Information from the administration; Inspection of policy documents; Referenda*” (Q23).

The tables present the percentages of councillors who gave a score of ‘0’ or ‘1’ (not effective/not effective enough), ‘2’ (moderately effective) and ‘3’ or ‘4’ (effective/very effective) on a 0-4 scale per instrument. The results are split up on the basis of the councillor function and position. Additionally, the tables show the strength and significance of the differences between the categories executive/non-executive on the one hand and the categories majority/opposition on the other hand (Cramer’s V).

Table 4.4 demonstrates that councillors with executive experience are generally more optimistic about the effectiveness of the classic councillor instruments (i.e. voting, setting the agenda and convening the council, inquiry and information) than lay councillors. The differences in the evaluation of the interpellation and inspection rights are not significant. One other result is remarkable: the executive councillors are less convinced of the effectiveness of citizen referenda as a possible instrument. Amongst the non-executive councillors, the opinions on this instrument are more balanced (even though only one-third of the councillors believe that referenda are an effective policy instrument).

Table 4.4. Councillors’ evaluation of their instruments according to their function in the council

Instrument	Executive			Non-executive			Cramer’s V (Sign)
	<i>Not effective (enough)</i>	<i>Moderately effective</i>	<i>(Very) effective</i>	<i>Not effective (enough)</i>	<i>Moderately effective</i>	<i>(Very) effective</i>	
Interpellation	18.1	21	60.9	23.3	24.6	52.1	.09 (.14)
Voting	10.2	16	73.8	23.6	20.3	56.1	.19 (.00)
Agenda and convocation	14.3	25.7	60	23.5	22	54.5	.12 (.03)
Inquiry	7.3	19.3	73.4	16.2	20.8	63	.14 (.00)
Information	4.7	16.4	78.9	6.7	24.1	69.2	.11 (.04)
Inspection	7.6	14.6	77.8	9.1	19.4	71.5	.07 (.41)
Referenda	45.5	29.8	24.7	33.8	29.3	36.9	.14 (.00)

(N=276, 275, 272, 275, 274, 275, 275 for executives and 549, 547, 541, 549, 551, 548, 545 for non-executives)

Table 4.5 analyzes the same instruments on the basis of the position of the councillors in the council. Except for the inspection of policy documents, which is considered to be an effective instrument by most councillors, we see that all the differences between the councillors from the majority and the councillors of the opposition are significant. The pattern is quite clear: 60 to 70% of the councillors from the majority are largely

convinced that their instruments are effective. This percentage is much lower in the group of councillors from the opposition. Only with regard to local referenda, opposition councillors are more optimistic.

Table 4.5. Councillors' evaluation of their instruments according to their position in the council

Instrument	Majority			Opposition			Cramer's V (Sign)
	<i>Not effective (enough)</i>	<i>Moderately effective</i>	<i>(Very) effective</i>	<i>Not effective (enough)</i>	<i>Moderately effective</i>	<i>(Very) effective</i>	
Interpellation	17.7	23.4	58.9	29.2	23.3	47.5	.17 (.00)
Voting	8.8	18.8	72.4	37.6	19.9	42.5	.37 (.00)
Agenda and convocation	15.9	21.6	62.5	28.8	27.4	43.8	.19 (.00)
Inquiry	8.4	18.9	72.7	20.4	24.2	55.4	.20 (.00)
Information	4.5	20.3	75.2	8.3	25.2	66.5	.11 (.04)
Inspection	6.6	18.4	75	10.7	17.2	72.1	.08 (.31)
Referenda	41.2	29.8	29	33.1	31.4	35.5	.15 (.00)

(N= 515, 512, 505, 513, 513, 512, 510 for majority and 288, 287, 285, 289, 290, 290, 287 for opposition)

In Table 4.6 we interpret councillors' evaluation of the information that they receive from the municipal administration. The original question runs as follows:

- “Do you get a satisfying amount of information from the municipal administration to perform your job as a councillor?” (Q11).

Table 4.6 presents the percentages of councillors that gave a score of ‘0’ or ‘1’ (fully/mainly unsatisfying), ‘2’ (neither satisfying nor unsatisfying) and ‘3’ or ‘4’ (satisfying/fully satisfying). The results are split up on the basis of councillors' function (i.e. executive experience or not) and position (i.e. majority or opposition) in the council. Additionally, the table presents the strength significance of the differences between these groups (Cramer's V).

Table 4.6 shows that councillors with experience in the executive board and councillors from the political majority are substantially and significantly more satisfied with the information that they receive from the municipal administration to do their job. Particularly councillors from the opposition feel that this is not always the case.

Table 4.6. Councillors' evaluation of the information by the municipal administration according to their function and position in the council

	Function		Position	
	<i>Executive</i>	<i>Non-executive</i>	<i>Majority</i>	<i>Opposition</i>
Fully/mainly satisfying	77.2	57.6	77.1	44.9
Neither satisfying nor unsatisfying	11.6	20.7	13.3	24.5
Fully/mainly unsatisfying	11.2	21.7	9.6	30.6
Cramer's V (Sign)	.25 (.00)		.37 (.00)	

(*N*= 277 for executive and 547 for non-executive; 512 for majority and 294 for opposition)

Finally, we also verify if the executives and/or councillors from the majority are more embedded in their political parties. To analyze this item we draw on two following question:

- “Do you presently have, or have you previously had, a position (board member, etc.) in your party's organization (beside the party's council group)? In the local party organization; In upper level party organizations” (Q30).

Table 4.7 presents the results for the local party, Table 4.8 focuses on the political party on the supra-local level. Obviously, councillors are more involved in their local party organization than in the organization of their party on the supra-local level. Furthermore, both tables demonstrate that there is no significant difference between councillors from the majority and councillors from the opposition in terms of the involvement in the party organization. However, the differences between councillors with experience in the BMA and lay councillors are significant (but not *very* strong either). The tables confirm that executives are more likely to occupy strong positions in their political parties.

Table 4.7. Councillors' position in the local party organization according to their function and position in the council

	Function		Position	
	<i>Executive</i>	<i>Non-executive</i>	<i>Majority</i>	<i>Opposition</i>
Yes, presently	70	61.8	65.3	66.3
Yes, previously	13	10.1	12.2	10.1
No, never	13.7	23.5	20.9	19.4
Not applicable	3.3	4.6	1.6	4.2
Cramer's V (Sign)	.12 (.01)		.09 (.12)	

(N= 270 for executive and 545 for non-executive; 508 for majority and 288 for opposition)

Table 4.8. Councillors' position in the upper party organization according to their function and position in the council

	Function		Position	
	<i>Executive</i>	<i>Non-executive</i>	<i>Majority</i>	<i>Opposition</i>
Yes, presently	31.2	24.6	27.7	28.8
Yes, previously	20.3	11	14.3	14.6
No, never	41.1	58.2	55.1	50.7
Not applicable	5.4	6.2	2.9	5.8
Cramer's V (Sign)	.17 (.00)		.08 (.28)	

(N= 260 for executive and 517 for non-executive; 481 for majority and 274 for opposition)

APPENDIX E. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION (CHAPTER 5)

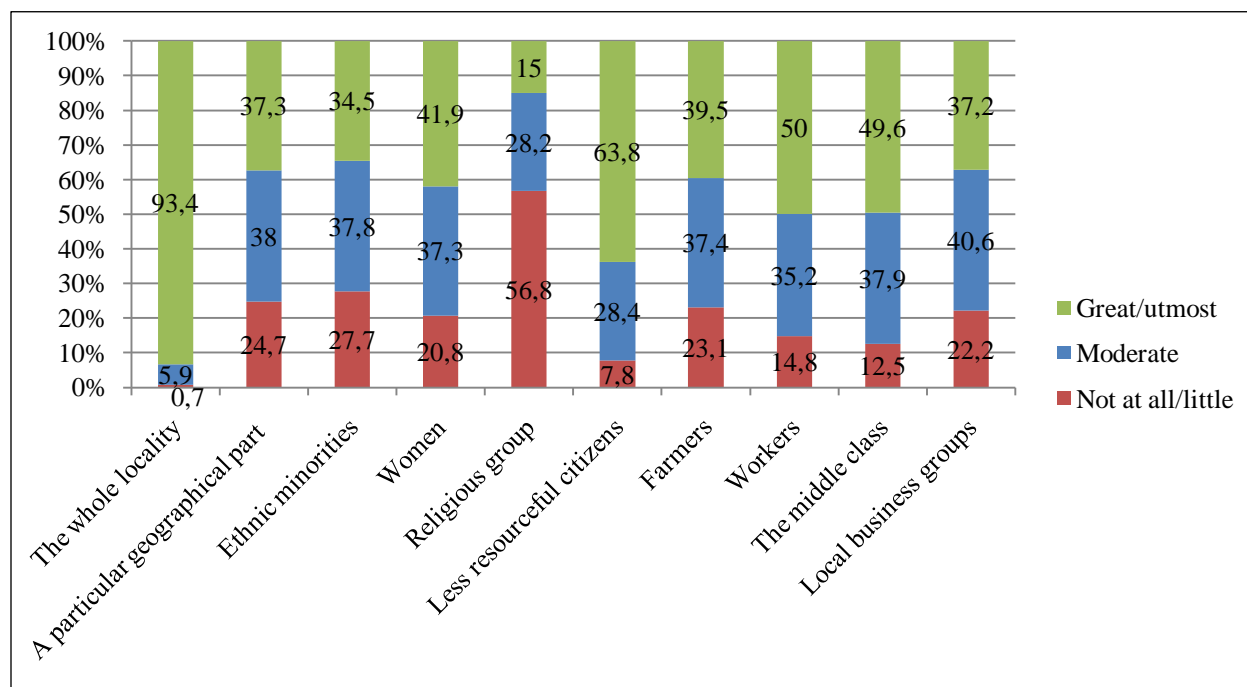
(A) *The classic notion of the representative ‘focus’ of the local councillors*

In addition to the analysis of councillors’ *representative style* in Chapter 5, this annex presents an analysis of its theoretical complement, the *representative focus*. The concept refers to the (particular group of) people whose interest(s) a councillor seeks to defend in office (Rao, 1998). We build our analysis on the following question:

- “How important is it for you as a local councillor to represent the following groups or interests? The whole locality; A particular geographical part of the area; Ethnic minority(ies); Women; Religious group/the Church; Less resourceful citizens; Farmers; Workers; The middle class; Local business groups” (Q16).

Figure 5.2 presents the results of the analysis, expressed in the percentages of councillors that have evaluated the importance of each item with a score of ‘0’ or ‘1’ (not important at all/of little importance), ‘2’ (of moderate importance) and ‘3’ or ‘4’ (of great importance/of utmost importance).

Figure 5.2. Representative focus of local councillors in Belgium



(N= 847, 827, 826, 828, 827, 836, 830, 837, 831, 828)

Figure 5.2 demonstrates that nearly every local councillor wishes to represent his or her local community at large (as they are formally expected to). In addition to this general focus, the councillors also hold interests of particular subgroups in mind. A majority of the councillors (63.8%) claim to advocate the interests of less resourceful citizens. The interests of the workers and the middle class are important for approximately half of the councillor population too. The interests of the remaining subgroups (a particular geographical part of the municipality, ethnic minorities, women, farmers and local business groups) are almost all advocated by one-third to 40% of the councillors. Religious groups are the exception. Only a minor part of the Belgian councillors keep the interests of a religious group (or the Church) in mind for council business. For the large majority of the councillor population, religion is no substantial focus of political representation at all.

(B) Correlation matrices of the items comprising our model of political representation

The second annex to *Chapter 5* presents the correlation matrices of the items that we have used to operationalize the concept *representative style*. They are based on the following questions:

- “In your experience as a councillor, how important are the following tasks for you as a councillor? Representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society; Implementing the program of my political party/movement; Publicizing the debate on local issues before decisions are taken; Explaining decisions of the council to the citizens” (Q10).
- “In your experience as a councillor, how would you define your contribution regarding the following tasks? Representing the requests and issues emerging from the local society; Implementing the program of my political party/movement; Publicizing the debate on local issues before decisions are taken; Explaining decisions of the council to the citizens” (Q24).

The tables include (a) the Spearman correlation coefficients to address the strength and significance of the relationships between the items, as well as (b) the mean scores of the items on a 0-4 scale (i.e. little or no importance/contribution; moderate importance/contribution; great or very great importance/contribution). Table 5.8 indicates that the mean scores for the four items on the attitudinal level are fairly high. Moreover, all items correlate significantly, positively and moderately/substantially to each other. The lower mean scores in Table 5.9 suggest that councillors can not entirely represent the people as they would wish to. However, all the items again correlate significantly, positively and moderately/substantially to each other.

Table 5.8. Correlation matrix of the items comprising the representative attitude

	Representing issues of locality	Implementing party program	Publicizing debate on local issues	Explaining council decisions
Implementing party program	.246 (.000)			
Publicizing debate on local issues	.511 (.000)	.249 (.000)		
Explaining council decisions	.410 (.000)	.290 (.000)	.402 (.000)	
N, Mean score (0-4), standard deviation	844 3.31 (.70)	846 2.79 (.89)	844 3.11 (.78)	845 2.96 (.82)

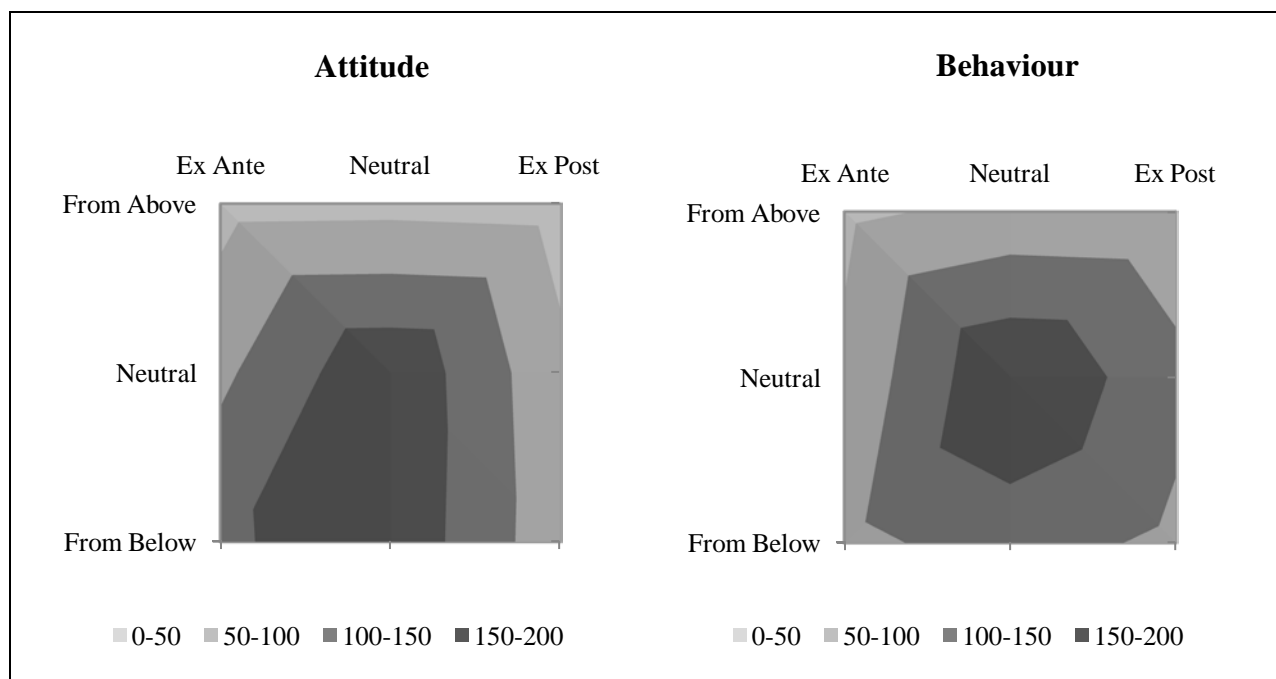
Table 5.9. Correlation matrix of the items comprising the representative behaviour

	Representing issues of locality	Implementing party program	Publicizing debate on local issues	Explaining council decisions
Implementing party program	.320 (.000)			
Publicizing debate on local issues	.547 (.000)	.359 (.000)		
Explaining council decisions	.471 (.000)	.348 (.000)	.436 (.000)	
N, Mean score (0-4), standard deviation	842 2.78 (.76)	846 2.53 (.91)	846 2.58 (.89)	847 2.70 (.86)

(C) Graphical depiction of the entrepreneurial shift in political representation

The third and final annex to *Chapter 5* presents a graphical depiction of the entrepreneurial shift in political representation from the attitudinal to the behavioural level. For this purpose, Figure 5.3 shows the frequency distributions of the response in terms of councillors' representative attitude and their representative behaviour organized according to the Andeweg/Thomassen typology.

Figure 5.3. Discrepancy in the representative style of local councillors in Belgium



(N=839, 840)

APPENDIX F. COUNCILLORS’ ROLE AND POSITION IN A COMPARATIVE FRAME (CHAPTER 6)

Our final appendix includes the annexes to the international comparison of the role and position of the local councillor (*Chapter 6*). Per theme of the chapter, we present a graphical picture of the frequency distributions of the included variables for each country/region (in percentages). The values and the number of cases per variable are not displayed in order to contain the information overload on the graphs (- they are included in the original tables in *Chapter 6*).

(A) The recruitment process of Belgian local councillors in a comparative frame

Figure 6.1. Social base of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France

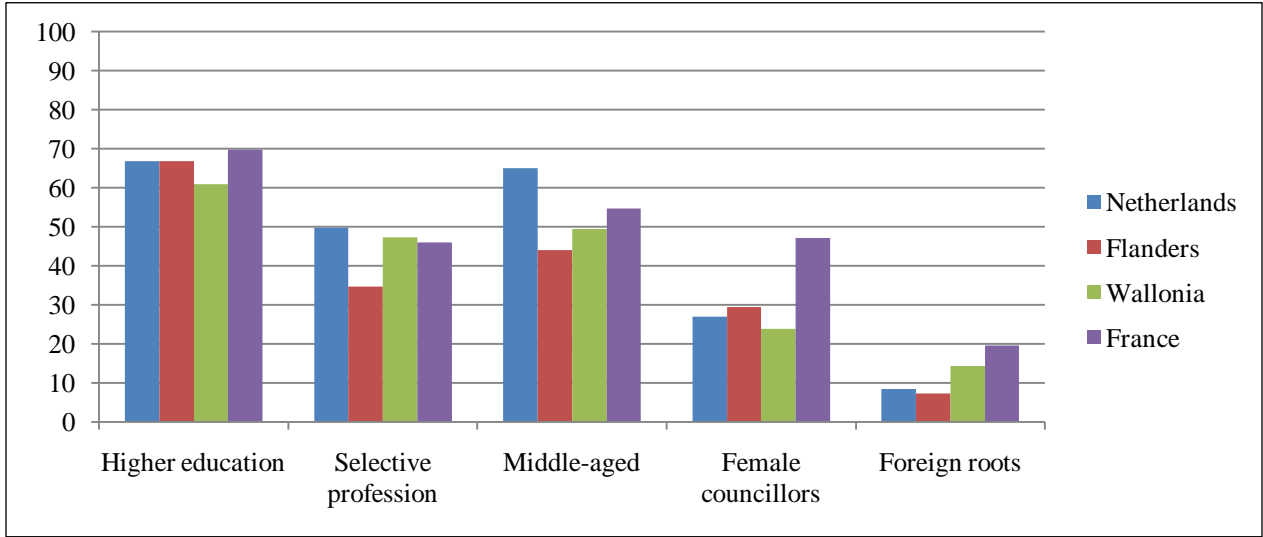


Figure 6.2. Political motivations of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France

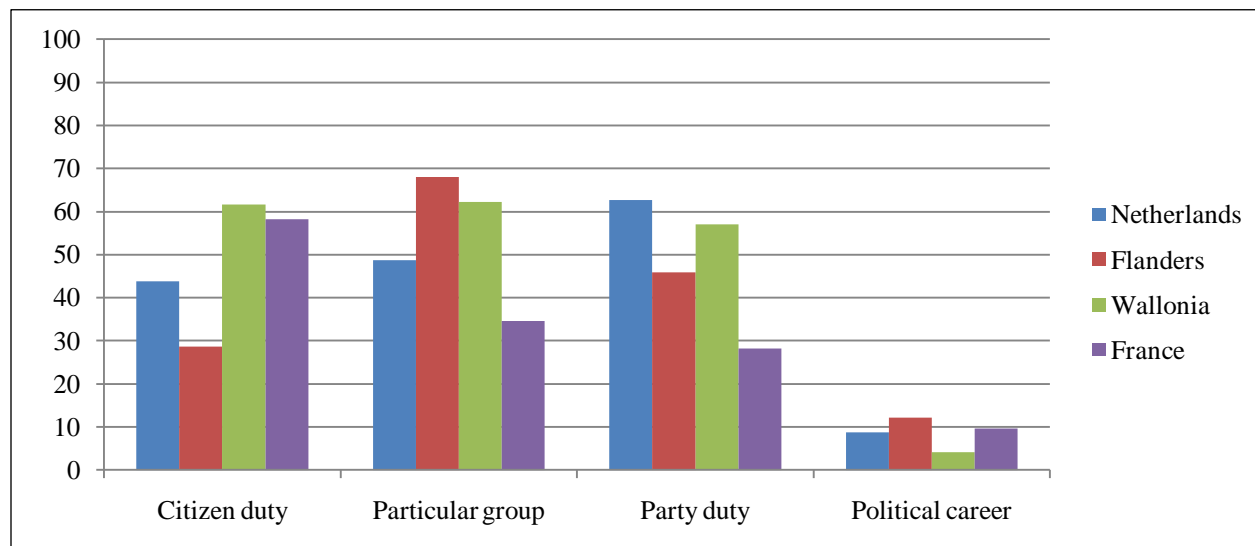


Figure 6.3. Apprenticeships of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France

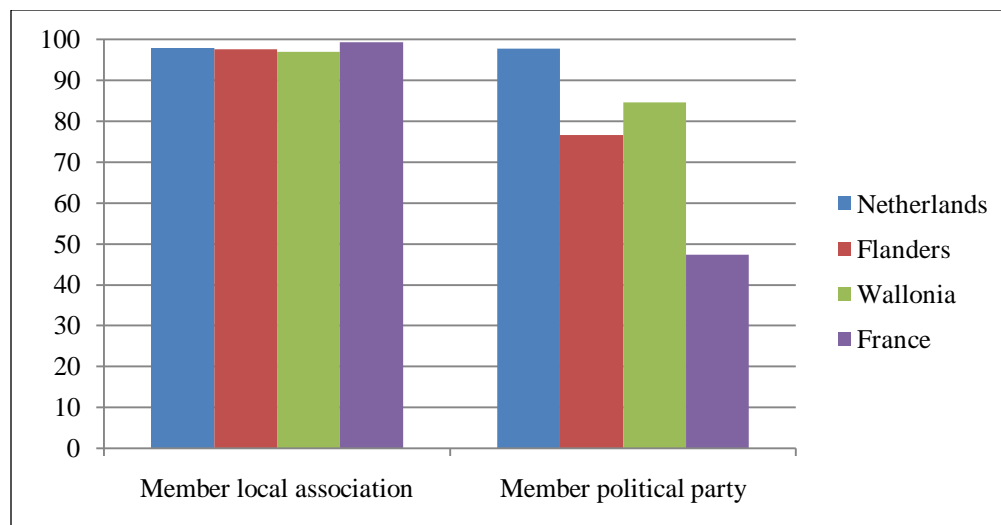
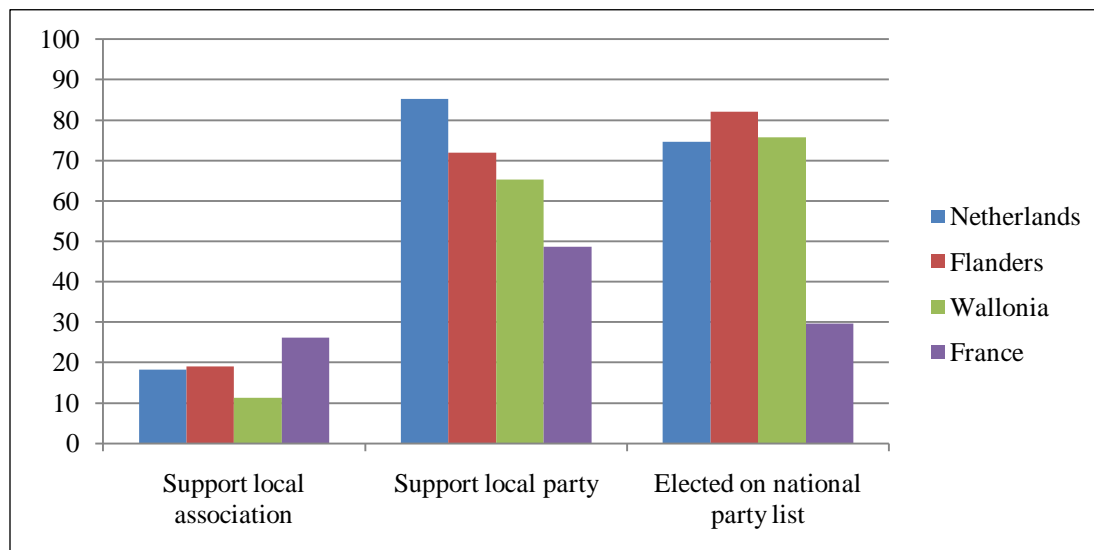


Figure 6.4. The election of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France



(B) The role orientation of Belgian local councillors in a comparative frame

Figure 6.5. Role attitude of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France

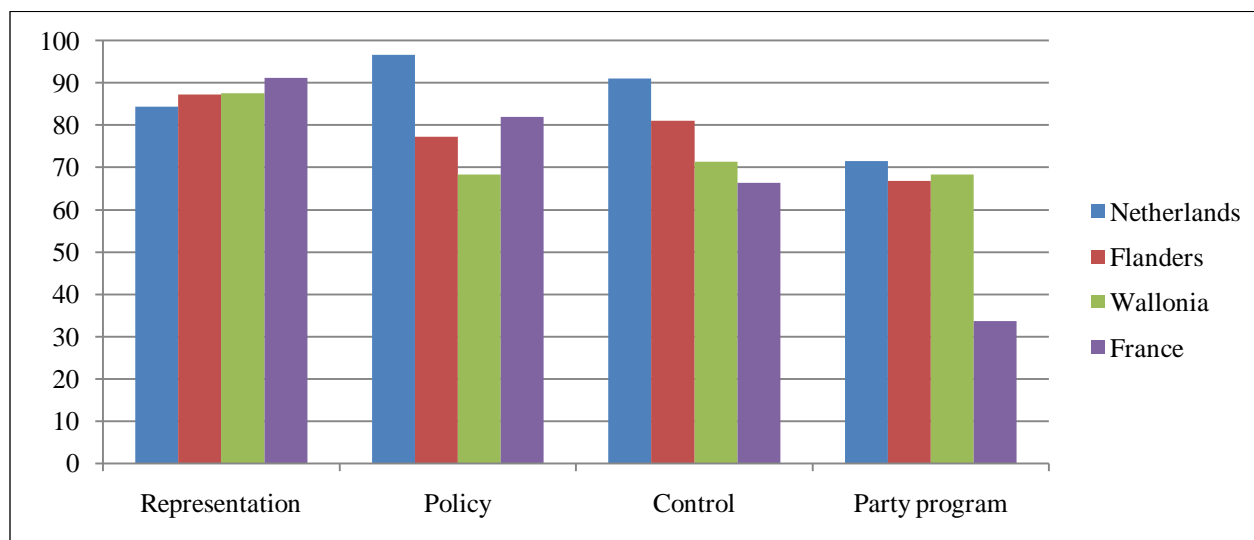
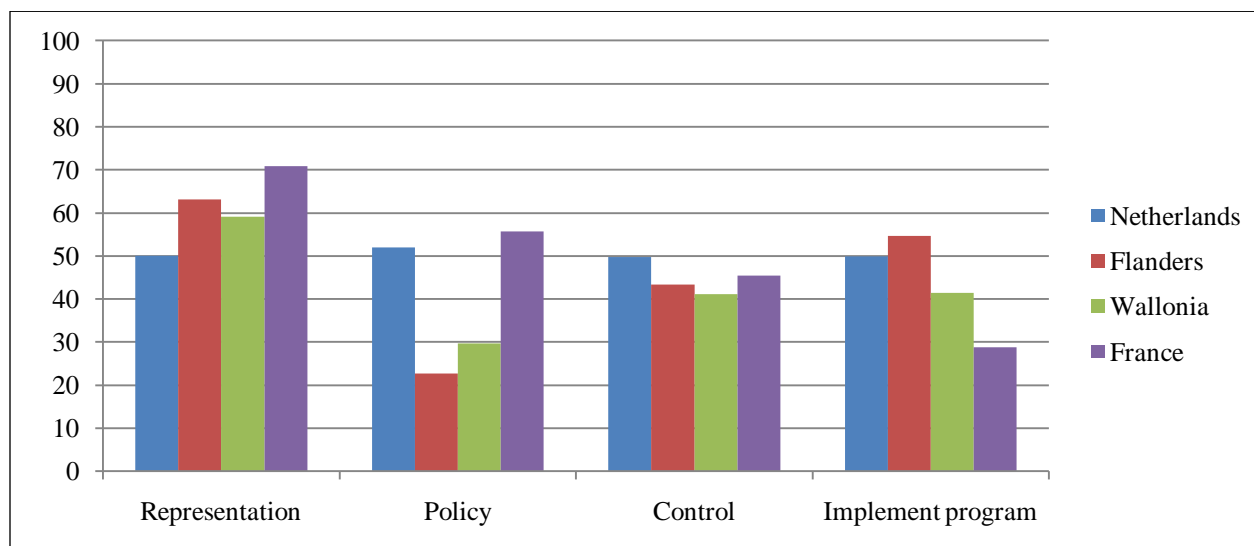
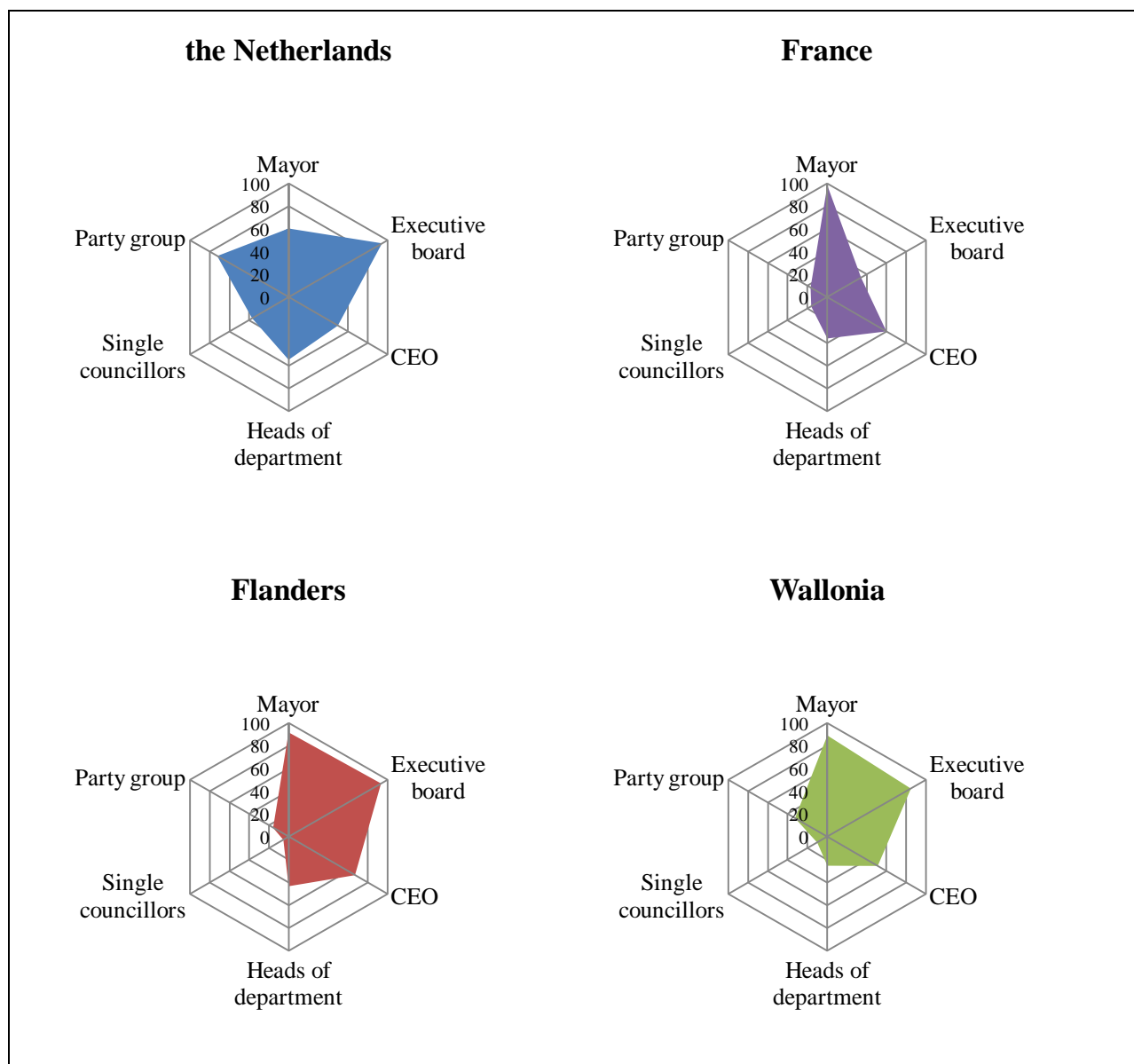


Figure 6.6. Role behaviour of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France



(C) The power balance of the Belgian local authorities in a comparative frame

Figure 6.7. Councillors' position in the local power triangle in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France



(D The relations of Belgian local councillors with citizens in a comparative frame

Figure 6.8. The representative contacts of local councillors with citizens in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France

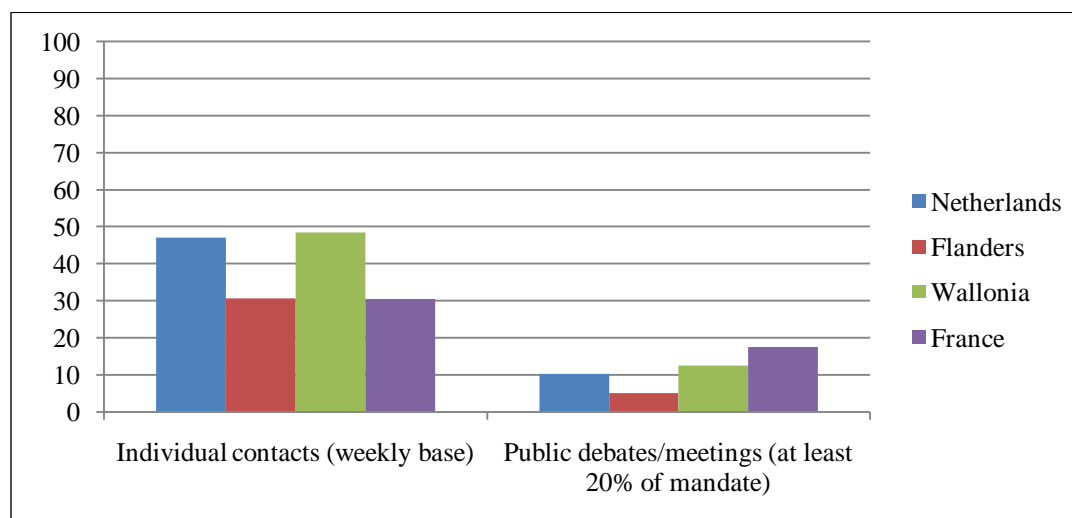
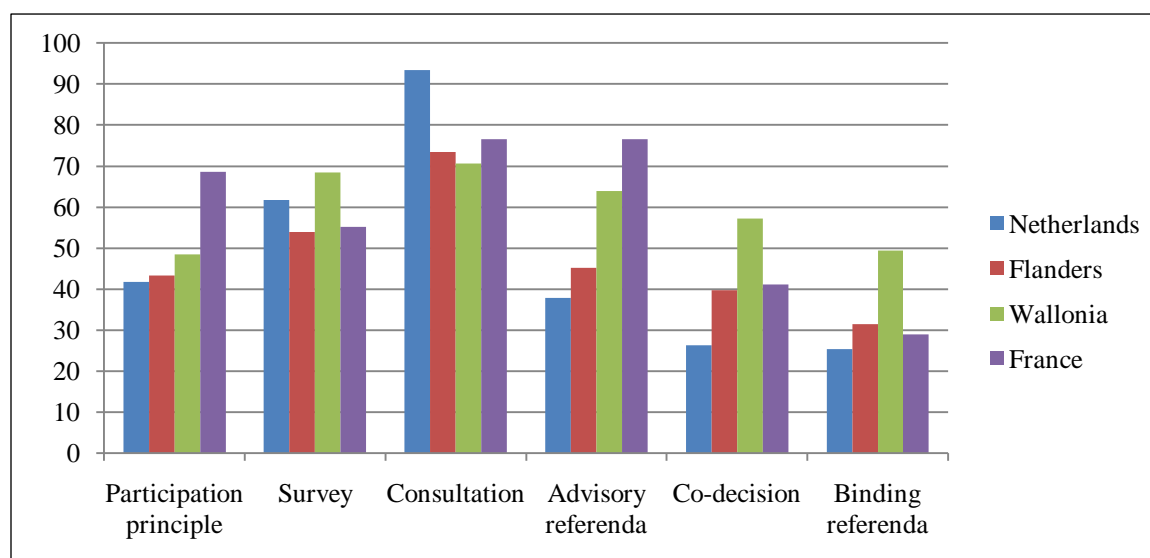


Figure 6.9. The attitude towards citizen participation of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France



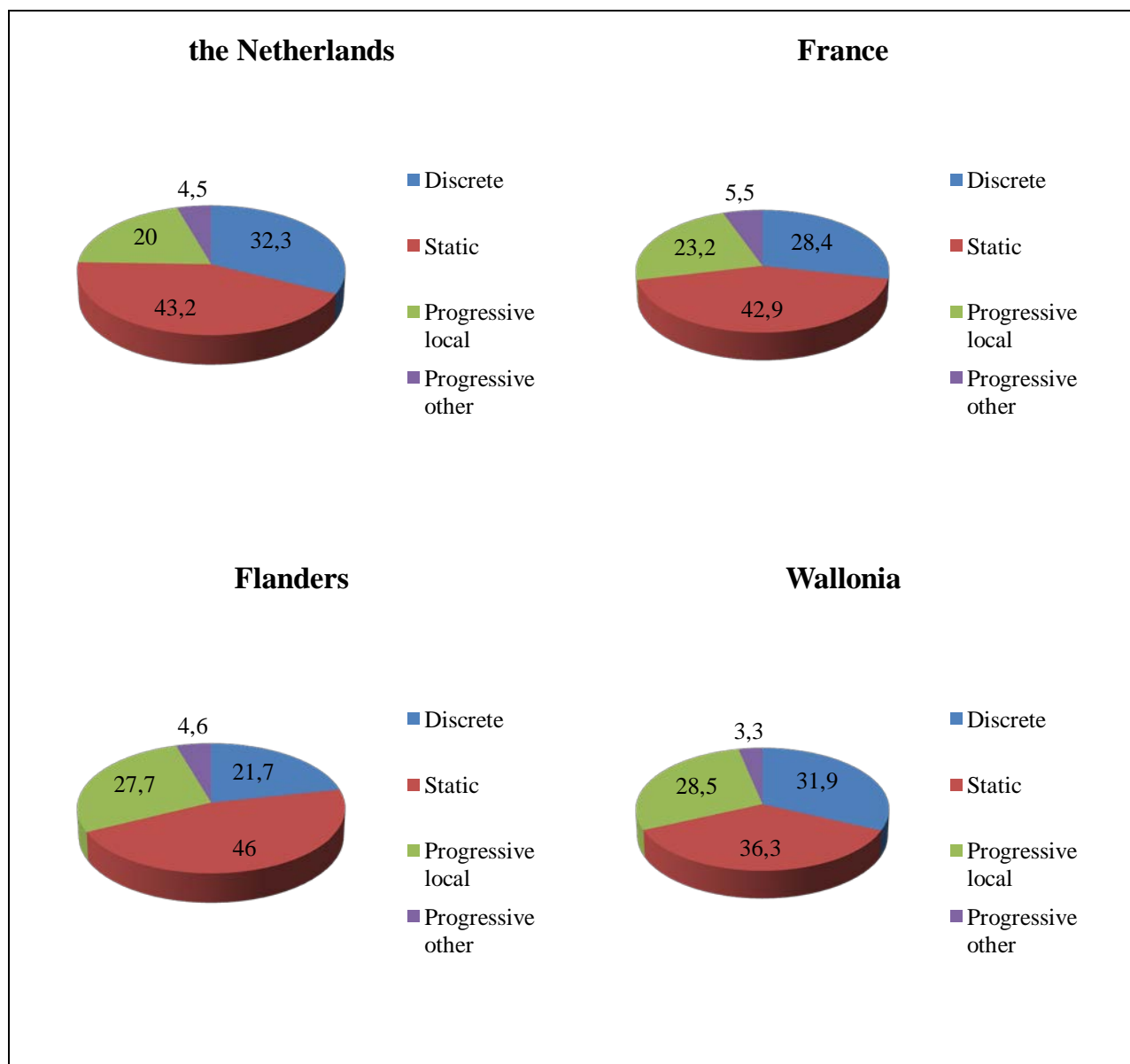
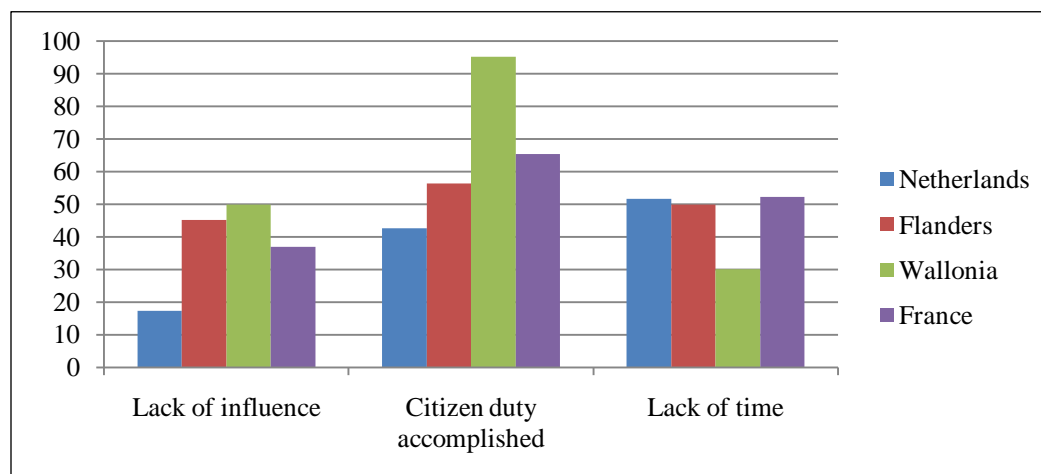
*(E) The future political ambitions of Belgian local councillors in a comparative frame***Figure 6.10. The future political ambitions of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France**

Figure 6.11. Turnover motives of local councillors in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France



(F) The party group of Belgian local councillors in a comparative frame

The final annex of this study concerns the functioning of the party groups in the respective local systems under study. *Chapter 6* has shown that there is a considerable difference in the influence of political parties between France on the one hand and the Netherlands and the Belgian regions on the other. In this annex, we present an insight into how these party groups function according to the councillors.

First, Table 6.6 analyzes the bond between the party group and the local party. Is the party group influenced by the party (i.e. top-down relation), and/or can the party group exert influence on the party (i.e. bottom-up relation)? Furthermore, has the party group a co-operative leader or not? To answer these questions we draw on the following question from the survey:

- “What is your opinion on the following statements? *The local party organization has much influence over the decisions of the party’s council group; The party’s council group has much influence over the decisions of the local party; The leader of the party group usually informs and seeks the support of the party group when decisions are taken*” (Q31).

Councillors could give a score of ‘0’ or ‘1’ (disagree totally, partly disagree), ‘2’ (neither agree nor disagree), or ‘3’ or ‘4’ (partly agree, totally agree) to the three statements. Table 6.7 presents the percentage of councillors who partly agree or totally agree with the statement, as well as the strength of the differences between the countries/regions (expressed by the Cramer’s V value).

The table shows that the party group functions most autonomously from the local party in France, both in terms of top-down and bottom-up relations. In the Belgian regions this connection is more pronounced. In Wallonia, more councillors feel that the top-down influence is strong while in Flanders, more councillors agree that the party group can also exert influence on the local party. In the Netherlands, many councillors are under the impression that the party group has a bottom-up impact on the local party too. Finally, the most striking result relates to the leader of the party group. In the Netherlands, almost every councillor feels that his or her party leader works in a co-operative way. In France and the Belgian regions, only 50 to 60% of the councillors agree with this statement.

Table 6.7. The party group in the council in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France (in percentages)

	<i>General</i>	<i>Netherlands</i>	<i>Flanders</i>	<i>Wallonia</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Cramer's V</i> (a)
<i>Influenced by local party organization</i> (N=1886)	55.5	54.7 (-0.8)	59.6 (+4.1)	64.2 (+8.7)	41.1 (-14.4)	.17
<i>Influence on local party organization</i> (N=1896)	62.7	74.9 (+12.2)	72.3 (+9.6)	60.8 (-1.9)	41.1 (-21.6)	.21
<i>Co-operative leader party group</i> (N=1909)	70.4	93.1 (+22.7)	63.7 (-6.7)	56.8 (-13.6)	66.9 (-3.5)	.31

(a) All associations are significant at the .05 level

Lastly, we compare the degree of party discipline in the different countries/regions when votes are to be cast. We use the following question as a proxy for this subject:

- “If there should be a conflict between a member’s own opinion, the opinion of the party group in the council or the opinion of the voters, how should, in your opinion, a member of the council vote? Vote according to his/her own conviction; Vote according to the opinion of the party group; Vote according to the opinion of the voters” (Q17).

Councillors could only choose one of the three possible options. Table 6.8 presents the frequency distributions of the answers per country/region, as well as the strength of the differences between the countries/regions. Generally, a majority of the councillors reckon

that the councillor should follow his or her own conviction, hence vote against the party whip. A minority thinks that the councillor should vote according to the opinion of the voters. Only in Flanders, a majority of the councillors feel that the councillor should obey the party orders after all. Again, we see that the impact of the party group is less strong in France. French councillors would also be (slightly) more inclined to follow the opinion of the voters.

Table 6.8. Voting discipline in the council in the Netherlands, Flanders, Wallonia and France (in percentages)

	<i>General</i>	Netherlands	Flanders	Wallonia	France	<i>Cramer's V</i> (a)
<i>Voting conflict</i> (N=1916)						.24
Own conviction	57.2	60.8 (+3.6)	36.8 (20.4)	57.5 (+0.3)	73.8 (+16.6)	
Opinion of party group	32.8	31.1 (-1.7)	52.9 (+20.1)	37 (+4.2)	10 (-22.8)	
Opinion of voters	10	8.1 (-1.9)	10.3 (+0.3)	5.5 (-4.5)	16.2 (+6.2)	

(a) *The associations are significant at the .05 level*

